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Here's how I did it

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



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President
National Radio
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

VOL. 2 JANUARY, 1941 NO. 2

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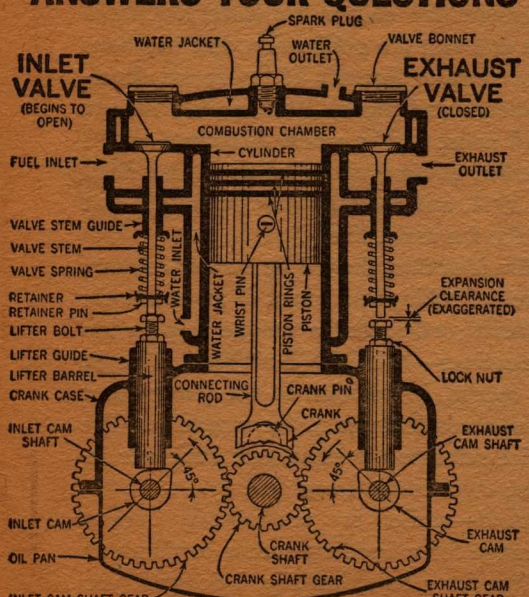


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If You Liked "Power"—Just Wait!

Dear Mr. Pohl:

Ratings on the November *Super Science*—

1.) "Asokore Power". Naturally. It's by de Camp.

2.) "Nova Midplane". Rather reminiscent of Campbell's Penton and Blake series, but amusing and quite satisfactory.

3.) "The Monster on the Border". Excellent. Not much plot, but well told.

4.) "Dimension-Hazard". Silly. Strictly fodder for lowbrows. But being a lowbrow I *enjoyed* the thing!

5.) "The Horizontals". A variation on a theme that goes back to Well's "War of the Worlds". Nevertheless, there's something about Long that invariably gets you.

6.) "The Outpost at Altark". The only good *Super Science* Brief you've ever published. More by Lowndes. Much more.

The remaining three stories are so bad, it's almost a rank impossibility to rate them in any sort of order. So I won't.

"Cepheid Planet". Obviously the writer's name was all that sold this.

"Secret of the Crypt". The plot was startlingly new. Earth invasions are an idea that has been seldom used in science fiction. *Super Science* and *Astonishing* will never reach the top until you get rid of your two worst hacks. I mean, of course, Saari and Kummer.

"Mutiny in Hell". The horrible writing suggested a vicious burlesque on fantasy and science fiction. Maybe it was. Yeah, maybe I was supposed to laugh. I didn't.

Compensating somewhat for these three very bad stories, was the tremendous improvement in your art.

The cover was good. Not just passable, or a little better than the monstrosities you've been using on the cover, but actually *good*. G-o-o-d.

And for the first and only time in *Super Science's* brief but spectacular history, the interiors were splendid. Not a bad one in the entire mag.

There're two things I'd like to add to my note about the *Southern Star,* the first Southern fan mag in fan history. One is the fact that the publication date has been moved up to January 15, by recent developments and plans. Another is that our staff artist will be a new discovery, and, I predict, as big a sensation in the fan field, as 1941, and the following years will find in the fan artist line.

Besides this, there'll be a swap column, a round robin department of an extremely unusual order, and a unique step in fan magazines—MUTANT articles. This is, of course, in addition to the many other announced features in the magazine. The price remains the same, one dime per issue; three issues for a quarter.

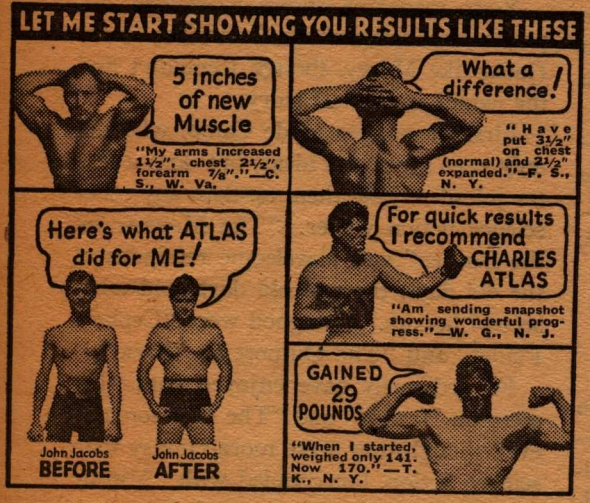
And—while it undoubtedly seems strange for a budding author to thank an editor for a rejection slip, I do want you to know that I appreciated your frank and

(Continued on page 6)



Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*





CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it—I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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MISSIVES AND MISSILES

(Continued from page 4)

very helpful note on my short story. Thank you very kindly, Mr. Pohl, and I'll accept your invitation to try again, as soon as I can cook up something to write about. Remember, you asked for it!—Joseph Gilbert, "Deep South Scientifictioneer," 3911 Park Street, Columbia, South Carolina.

Sure—We Did It!

Dear Editor:

Glad to see that you heeded my threatening letter which you printed in the November issue, and restored *The Science Fictioneer* to the magazine. But did you have to cut the number of novelettes down to three in order to do that?

Can't you work out some sort of a compromise whereby we can have *The Science Fictioneer* AND four novelettes?—A. R. Logan, Hotel Adelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Want List

Dear Editor:

Why not give us a few science fiction stories by A. Merritt, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Leslie F. Stone, Raymond Z. Gallun, Otis Adelbert Kline, and other old-time writers? And please have Neil R. Jones write a sequel to "Invisible One."—Ernest R. Stout, 2402 South Cerhokee Street, Denver, Colorado.

No More Monsters?

Editor, *Super Science Stories:*

I have been reading your magazine for about six months, but this is the first time I have written.

I've just finished the November issue, and I would like to class the stories as follows: 1, Cepheid Planet; 2, Nova Midplane; 3, Dimension-Hazard; 4, Mutiny in Hell; 5, Asokore Power; 6, The Monster on the Border; 7, Secret of the Crypt; 8, The Horizontals; and 9, The Outpost at Altark.

Let's have more space-travel and rockets, and skip the bogey-men. And try to improve the quality of the Super Science Briefs.—Paul Bryant, Brown Military Academy, Pacific Beach, California.

You're Right—It Was Morey

Dear Mr. Pohl:

From the corner newsstand and from my mailbox respectively, I received the November *Super Science Stories* and my green *Science Fictioneer* card within five minutes of each other yesterday.

Your magazine shows a decided improvement this month, from the cover (looks like Morey, though I couldn't find the name) to the last story.

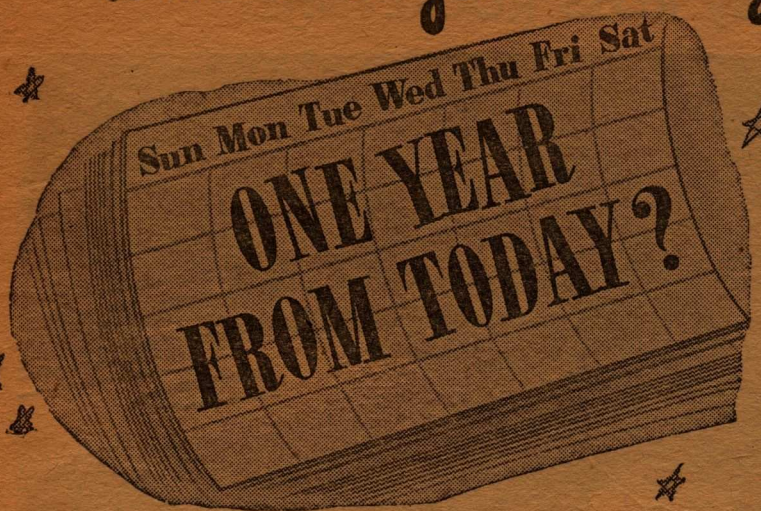
First place goes to de Camp, who not only uses ingenious ideas, but does a better job of writing them up than any other science fiction writer. "The Monster on the Border" was a welcome reminder of the old days, the real old days, and takes second honors. Also good were "Cepheid Planet" and "The Outpost at Altark."

I'd ordinarily have enjoyed both "Dimension-Hazard" and "The Horizontals" even though they were more fantasy than science fiction, but coupled with "Mutiny in Hell", an out and out weird, it was too much fantasy for one issue. An occasional humorous fantasy is O.K., but, after all, the name of the mag is *Super Science Stories.*

"Secret of the Crypt" was fair, as such stories go, but I rarely like even the good ones of that type. As for "Nova Midplane," I couldn't get interested in it. Too much trouble reading between the ads maybe. Can't you keep the ads away from the stories?

Add one more vote for a two-way letter column, both here and in Astonishing. They're really much more interesting than the monologue type.—Lynn Bridges, 7730 Pitt, Detroit, Michigan.

what will you be doing



MEN, there's no *sense* in drifting along at the same old dull, drab job! You've got one life — that's all. What you make of it is your business — but if you want to make a *success* of it, it's time to *get going!*

Listen. Some of the biggest men in this country were in your shoes once. But they knew one thing! They knew that it takes training—TRAINING—to succeed in this world! And they got that training through the I. C. S.!

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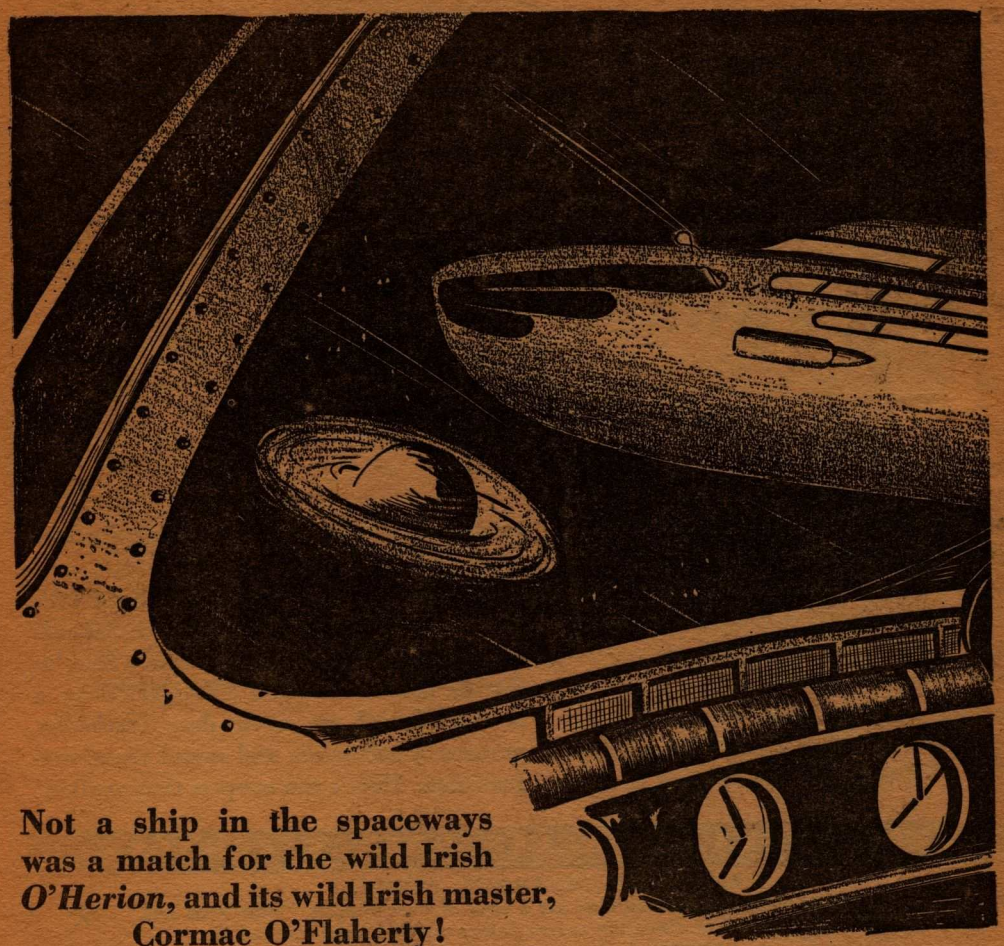
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COLLISION COURSE

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE



Not a ship in the spaceways was a match for the wild Irish *O'Herion*, and its wild Irish master, Cormac O'Flaherty!

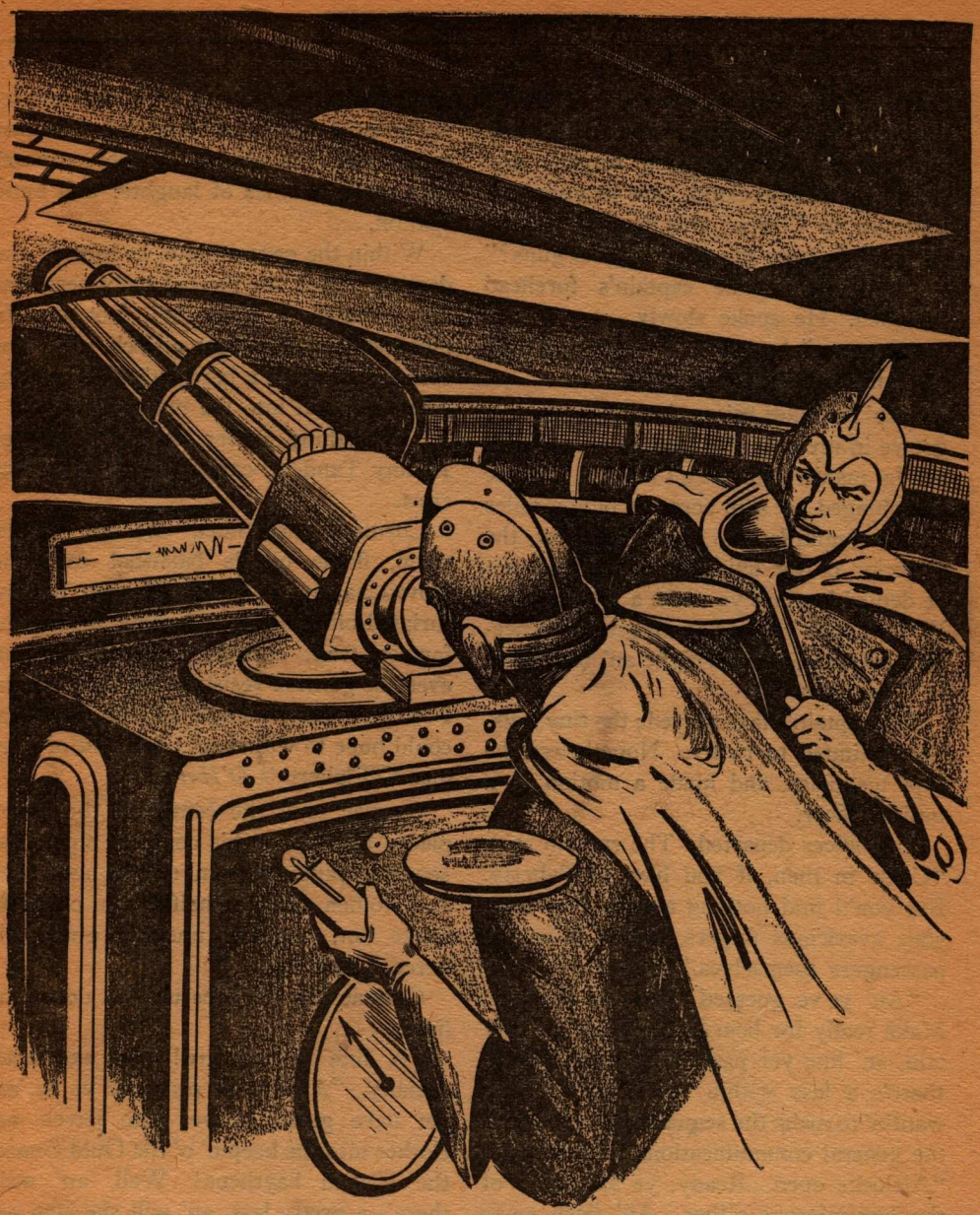
CHAPTER ONE

The Name of Cormac O'Flaherty

THE passenger ship rushed out of the emptiness, and the Irishman Cormac O'Flaherty leaned forward to watch it through the vision plate, his intense blue eyes sparkling. When his own ship, the *O'Herion,* seemed almost upon the other, his full baritone voice blasted orders through the pilot tube. In thirty seconds, the *S. S. Helena* was standing off, apparently motionless, though in actuality the *O'Herion* had merely duplicated her course and her velocity.

Again Cormac's orders blasted out, through the general communications tube this time; and every man aboard stepped to his post, the boarding crew donning space-suits, flame pistols, projectors, and all those other appurtenances which made for a successful capture.

Again Cormac reached out a blunt-fingered hand to the vision-plate bank, his angular, devil-may-care face laughing, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. A tinny gong ran through the cabin. The



vision plate swirled, as connections were made, and Cormac, with his roving eye, saw the interior of the *S. S. Helena's* control room, a splendidly clad, fierce-eyed captain standing in full view, and ranged behind him a round dozen officers, fingers itching at their flame pistols.

"None o' that!" said Cormac sibilantly. "I' throth, an' ye'd fry in yer own fat if ye tried to hold back the strength o' Cormac O'Flaherty!"

His name caused a silent explosion. Those figures in the vision plate moved not, nor did they speak. Faces blanched, muscles on clean-shaven faces twitched. The scene became a tableau, and at the visible evidence of their fear Cormac O'Flaherty raised his handsomely clad bulk to its feet, and laughed uproariously.

"The sight o' ye!" he gasped. "By the powdhers o' war, an' my name is a terror! Ah, I would not have it so, except that a

man an' his outlaws must eat, i' faith! Come, now," he suddenly roared, his full, clean-shaven face growing terrible and dark as a thundercloud, "are ye givin' admittance to Cormac this instant, or are ye goin' to taste the might o' his guns?"

A muscle in the captain's forehead twitched. He spoke slowly.

"Cormac," he said, "is there anything we can do to send you away?"

"An' for whut raison, indaid, when I've got ye in my grasp? Come, now, an' ye'll not be manin' that, at all at all? Cormac has plunged his ship across a billion miles of the luminiferous aither to view the ainterior o' yer ship, an' faith, he'll not be denied because ye make a plea of him! Will ye open yer ports, an' give us peaceable entrance, or is it fight an' bloodshed ye'll be havin'?"

The captain's face greyed; the tiny muscle continued to twitch. Nonetheless, he kept his poise, and made a motion to a junior officer.

The officer departed. The captain said, "Come in then, if you like, O'Flaherty. But you'll find nothing aboard that suits your avaricious fingers, unless it be the passengers themselves."

"An' ye've guessed right, so ye have. Make ready for boardin', my darlin' captain, an' line yer passengers up. Throth, there's a lass within that Cormac is a-wantin' to make the acquaintance of!" Into the general communications tube he said, "Airlocks open. Ready, ye spalpeens of the luminiferous aither. An' flash away with ye!"

LIKE fireflies, darting rocket flames from shoulder exhausts, the boarding force, forty strong, made the hundred foot jump across empty space to the unfortunate *S. S. Helena.* Airlock doors had opened inward, revealing brilliantly lighted interiors. Cormac's roving eyes checked over each man; saw him enter the ship; made a final check-up of his own vessel, and himself strode from the room, secured an orderly, and clambered into his own space suit, his almost boyishly smooth face set with lines of laughter and anticipation.

Within the next minute, he himself was darting across the eternal emptiness, had set a massive, space-clad foot on the metallic floor of an open airlock, was being escorted through a labyrinth of branching corridors, and into the main salon.

"Everything under control," nodded Johnny Tandem, captain of the boarding crew.

Cormac's men lined one end of the salon, flame pistols balanced easily in gloved hands. A group of quiet but infuriated officers were standing against the farther wall, entirely helpless, without even the germ of resistance in their minds. For there was no single ship in space that could hope to withstand the might of Cormac O'Flaherty's *O'Herion.*

Cormac took the center of the stage, placed his fists on his compact hips. Passengers, ranging from middle-aged men and women down to half-grown children, spoke not, fidgetted uneasily under his fierce, Celtic stare.

Cormac ran his eyes up and down the line.

"A fine lot ye are!" he exclaimed jovially. "As rich as peacocks ye be, an' yet have given all yer fine jewels an' clothes into the keepin' o' the Ould Guard, the blasted haythens! Well, an' well, there's a pretty lass, an' will she step out o' line, so that Cormac may view her, an' properly appreciate the fine things his wicked, sinful life have sundered from him?"

A SUPPLE-WAISTED girl, her rose-tinted face composed and untroubled, stepped forward. She stared at Cormac unflinchingly.

"If you mean me," she said without inflection, "take your look; though I'm

not used to being stared at by apes."

"Arrah!" exploded Cormac. "An' ye've the saucy tongue! Now, now, my fine lass, there's a heap o' learnin' ye've got to do before ye can talk to yer elders. Is there a way to make ye keep yer smart tongue in cheek while I ask a few questions of ye? Or is that yer fine upbringing has given yet too much spirit? Now, now, speak not, lass, if ye feel the urge. By the powdhers o' war, an' I'll not be needin' your tongue! Nancy Smith, that be your name?"

The girl nodded.

"An' kem out o' the planet Airth?" Again she nodded. "An' yer pa be the owner of ten billion dollars, the ould haythen? Ah, an' thank ye fer yer smooth answers. Indaid, it does much to absolve the troubles o' life from Cormac's weary brain. Now, there's a fine girl, step over here, an' by the powdhers o' war, ye're our prisoner, so ye are, 'till yer ould man balances poor Cormac's budget!"

Without a word, without an expression that might have indicated alarm or terror, the girl Nancy Smith fell away from the line, and went to a place beside Cormac.

Cormac allowed his blue eyes to rove over her—her figure, her face. She looked back at him so directly, and so without self-consciousness, that he flinched, shifted his broad shoulders uncomfortably, and then faced his men.

"Back ye go," he commanded, "an' the girl with ye. Come, ye bewitched spacehounds of the luminiferous aither, an' let's to our duty!" His bold eyes swept the line of officers. To the grim-faced Captain he said, he said jovially, "There's no harm in Cormac, man! See ye the gloomy side of it? By the powdhers o' war, ye've a long life to live, i' throth, an' 'twill not pay ye at all at all to bask in the glumness, eh? Come now, there's a radio message ye can send to the girl's ould man—ten million dollars it is, an' he'll have his high-bred girl back from the outlawed hands o' Cormac O'Flaherty himself! An' niver an Irishman yit whut kept his promises more faithful. Guid luck to ye all—my personal fairies guard ye!"

And thus Cormac O'Flaherty left the *S. S. Helena,* bearing with him the prize of the solar system, a young girl who had never whimpered in her whole life, and was resolved not to whimper now.

CHAPTER TWO

Twelve Sixty-Nine

"SIT down there, lass," said Cormac, studying her with blue eyes from beneath black, beetling eyebrows. "Augh! An' ye have the look o' sadness in yer eye, too! Is it a sad life, this, that boasts so many beauties? Look around ye—throth, the stars, the Sun, poor dying Mars, an' Airth in the far distance if ye have but the eye to see it. Ould Cormac, he has his riches in the lovely luminiferous aither, an' not in his pocket book, as so many, i' throth, believe. You've no word to say, at all at all?"

"I'm not used to being kidnapped," the girl said. "Besides that, your crew has a funny streak of humor. One of them tried to throw his arm around me."

"Arrah!" exploded O'Flaherty, looking her up and down. "An' whut would ye expect, ye that have the looks of one of Erin's own fairies? But there's a limit to their tomfoolery, by the powdhers o' war; an' they'll abide by the orders an' the big fist o' their master. Whut yer reason for goin' to Mars?"

She shrugged, eyed him steadily, as if in immense curiosity. She was not a tall girl, but she stood as straight and inflexible as a column of smoke in still air. Her face was gently curved, particularly so at the nose, so that Cormac would certainly have thought her Irish if her hair had not been a lustrous brown.

"Well, thin!" said Cormac, shrugging in turn. "If it's not in ye to tell me the raison fer yer voyage, it's not in me to ask, aither! Aw, an' whut's ten million dollars to yer ould man? Faith, an' this little adventure wull be worth that to ye."

"You'll never get away with it, Mr. O'Flaherty," the girl said steadily.

"Mr. O'Flaherty, an' fancy that!" marvelled Cormac. "Come now, an' ye'll call me Cormac, for I was niver the one to hope fer sich respect from a comely lass. Ye'll call me Cormac, for the mister has a most awkward sound, so it has. An' why, Nancy, my lass, think you that ould Cormac wull not pull the trick?"

She ran her small, white hand along the curved edge of the vision plate blank. She said, the penciled lines of her brows drawing down, "Your base is on 1269, isn't it—Cormac?"

"Faith, yis," said Cormac, puzzled. "But it's common knowledge, so it is, an' a strange thing that ye ask. Come, come, lass, an' why wull poor ould Cormac have the divil's own time gettin' away with his crime?"

"The Old Guard," she said presently.

Cormac smote the back of a chair with the flat of his hand. His full lips curled upward in a frank sneer. "Arrah! The Ould Guard indaid! An' they with ships that seem like to fall in twain when ould Cormac stares at them with both his Irish eyes? I' faith, Nancy, an' I thought to couple yer beauty with brains!"

She made a slow twisting motion with her body, turned her head and looked at him sidewise, out of smiling, unfrightened eyes. "And you think I'm beautiful, Cormac?" Her voice was soft, caressing.

Cormac started violently, stared, smote the back of the chair again.

"Ye'll get nowhere with sich tactics, lass! Away with ye, to yer bed—this be yer cabin. An' when ye wake again, 'twill be on asteroid 1269, within which all my riches an' all my crimes lay—ready victim for the Ould Guard, should they have the guid luck an' the brains to take it!"

The girl turned, hiding a smile which made Cormac doubt his senses.

He said unsteadily, "Sure, Cormac, an' she has no fear o' ye at all at all. Sure, an' sich lasses were all gone at the turn o' the century. A throwback she is, thin. Ah, well, she's but a heap o' money, an' naught else to Cormac!"

THE *O'Herion* plunged headlong through the black gulf of space; ripped across the main asteroidal belt, and flung herself by pure momentum on a million miles farther, at last to see errant 1269 hurdling toward her.

Jagged and ragged was this asteroid, all of ten miles deep, without sign of civilized life on her surface, and no indication that perchance a motley horde of pirates used its interior for their base. Yet, as the *O'Herion* braked, slowed down to a crawl, gradually settling toward a gaping crevice, a huge metal plate slid smoothly away, and a gaping interior was revealed. The *O'Herion* floated lightly through, came to rest on a clamp-cradle; and a half dozen of the ground crew propelled themselves forward in this negligible gravity, and anchored her to the ground.

Air rushed into the huge airlock as the outer door closed. The airlocks of the *O'Herion* themselves then opened, and her crew, their duties done for this day, streamed forth. And last came the wild Irishman Cormac O'Flaherty, leading the girl before him, and splitting his lips in laughter as he called out his greetings to these men who, though mastered by him, were truly and foremost, his friends.

"See now what I've picked up from this little cruise," he cried, bringing Nancy to a sudden halt. "Faith, an' she's the pretty one, but by the powdhers o' war, you'll remember that not a hand amongst you but is too dhirty to wave in front o'

her, much less touch her, to be sure! Grasp ye that, an' there's a long life ye'll all be livin', doubtless! Now away with ye, an' let's to the palace o' Cormac O'Flaherty!"

Tunnels, hewn from the solid rock, stretched away without end. Cormac strutted beside the girl, talking in great good humor, his 190 pounds of compactly situated muscle and bone swaggering to the rhythm of his endless Irish idiom. The girl did not speak, but seemed quite content to listen, to watch the pirates who led the way, though at times an abstracted, troubled look came to her face and her eyes; but when they came forth into the rock-hewn palace of Cormac O'Flaherty, she gasped audibly, and her blue eyes widened. From where they stood, a full half-mile underground, the tunnel was no longer a tunnel, but had turned into a vast courtyard.

Stretching away from this pivotal point ran a dozen paths bordered with a luxuriance of bushes and colorful flowers; and those paths went directly between the marble pillars that supported the invisible roof of the cave; and beyond the pillars one caught sight of fountains spraying clear, lazy streams of water into an atmosphere that might have been stolen from the olive-growing lands of Italy; and saw potted palms, and alabaster and marble halls studded with stones that scintillated. Quiet reigned, for even the pirates were watching Nancy Smith's reaction in expectant silence; and she gasped again.

She turned to Cormac and knew that he had been watching her, and saw that his pleasure was flaring in his barbarian eyes.

"It's a fairyland, Cormac," she said. "There isn't—there *can't* be—another place like it in the whole system. It's—Cormac, it's so beautiful! You built it, Cormac?"

"Throth, child, and someday ould Cormac will build another with his ill-gotten



gains! But, by the powdhers o' war, ye've not seen the half of it. Ye've but got a worm's-eye view of the beauties Cormac lays claim to. His vast dominion stretches to a mile on either side o' ye; an' faith, the courtyards, an' the fountains, an' all the pretty statues, an' the cherubs that grace the walls—sure, an' it's a sight to make yer head swim. Sure, Cormac loves beauty, for he was raised on the sparkling shores o' Lough Mask; an' Joyce's country knew him fer fifteen years before the law sent him out into the cold wastes of the luminiferous aither! His poor Irish sowl, that had loved all the beauteous things o' dame nathur, an' the works o' man, these were things that his heart could not be denied."

THE bold, whimsically arrogant look fell from his face. He flushed as his eyes swept her face, her body. "Faith, an' ye like the beauties that Cormac has brought to the cold heart o' 1269?"

"I think it is very wonderful, Cormac. In spite of the fact that you must have stolen all these things."

"Well, an' so!" he exclaimed half angrily. "An' where's the man in the system whut loves the guid things o' life like Cormac? Ah, these beauties have found their rightful place, sure."

She began walking down the path, staring straight ahead of her, and Cormac could not know that she was biting at her lips. Cormac followed after her, and his men behind him moved on again.

"Cormac," she said. She paused. "Cormac, there's the Old Guard. They're liable to come and take me away. I know Commander John Reynolds—very well—"

"Wull, an' if ye do, whut's the differ?" Cormac had stopped her, and was sneering frankly again. "Sure, an' a rich man's daughter, an' a pretty one at that, would doubtless have all the great men in the system begging fer her favor, now wouldn't she?"

She walked on steadily. "I mean," she said, getting the words out with difficulty, "that I know him—I mean, he'll do everything he can to take me away—he's liable to blow your so-called impregnable base into little pieces, Cormac!"

"An' whut's the manin' o' that statement, Nancy lass?" His eyes were boring into her as she faced him. But her face was composed, quiet, again, her look steady. "Nothing, Cormac."

"Well, an' it's a guid thing, so it is! Come along then, an' I'll show ye to yer rooms. An' it's a blasted shame the haythen king o' England ain't here to envy ye the munificence ye'll be livin' in from now on!"

CHAPTER THREE

Up, Ye Spalpeens!

A WEEK passed.

Nancy Smith sat at Cormac's side, her solid plate fork occasionally spearing at bits of shrimp salad, her lips at times sipping of a rich red Muscatel. The great voice of half a hundred pirates, as they ate and jested and rattled their dishes, was a rising and falling roar in her ears; and her abstraction was broken only by the rich baritone voice of the Irishman Cormac.

"Whut be ye thinkin', Nancy, lass? Is it in yer heart to feel sadness when, throth, Cormac has treated ye like a princess half the time, an' like a goddess the rest? Come now, a million dollars fer yer thoughts, an' not a cent less."

She smiled at him dazzlingly, so that he felt sick and faint where his stomach was.

"I couldn't have been treated any better—not near as good—in my own home, Cormac. I was thinking—" the penciled lines of her brows drew together, and a shadow darkened her clear eyes—"I was thinking that all this can't last—for you,

I mean. You've surrounded yourself with such lovely things—marble and jewels and plants, and I know you're happy most of the time. But Cormac, when the crash comes, when all this is taken away from you—when your band of outlaws is split up or captured—perhaps you'll be captured too—when you're like a hunted dog without a cent to your name, what's going to become of you?"

Cormac banged his fork down angrily, and swung his body half-way around to face her. "Faith, lass," he said furiously, "an' ye think unwelcome thoughts. Whut brand o' raison is it that tells ye that one day Cormac will be like a hunted dog? Why, by the powdhers o' war—by all the spry little gods o' my lost Erin!—there's a divil in ye that makes ye bring the thought to mind! I've told ye the truth—1269 belongs to Cormac, an' throth, mighty guns and flame throwers and rays spot her surface, so that even if the Ould Guard kem in full force to defeat Cormac, they'd be blasted out of the luminiferous aither, so they would! Aye, they knew the hideout o' Cormac O'Flaherty, but there's a fear in them for Cormac's mighty weapons. They've got all Airth an' the planets so, but it's a saying amongst them that all else belongs to Cormac, an' bad cess to him, the ould haythen! Whut say yet to that?"

She stared straight in front of her. Her slim white fingers took a napkin from her lap, patted at her lips. She shook her head once, briefly, as if trapped, and pain appeared momentarily in her normally composed eyes. She started to speak; then she thought better of it. She rose, smiled dazzlingly at Cormac.

"You said you were going to show me the Court of Lions, Cormac."

Cormac rose dazedly to his feet. "So I was," he said, huskily. Something was whispering in his mind, something horrible that this girl knew, and wouldn't tell. He should wrench it out of her. He should break one of her lovely bones, or put his big hands around her neck. . . . But no, he didn't know what he was thinking, to be thinking a thing like that.

"Faith," he mumbled. "Sure, I'll show ye."

THE heart of the solar system was trouble, and trouble throbbed through it in beats. Cormac O'Flaherty was the fierce-eyed devil who ruled the spaceways, and the Old Guard shuddered uncomfortably when his name was brought to mind. Passenger traffic was heavy. Mercantile trade was a steady stream—Venus, Mars, Luna, Jovian, Uranian, and Saturnian moons were ports of call. The big Third Millennium Boom was on, and mankind was growing richer with each passing second—and swelling the fabulous coffers of Cormac O'Flaherty at the same time. The Old Guard knew the treasure-house that was the errant asteroid 1269, knew that Cormac lived his luxuriant life there—little they could do about it. Oh, a capture now and then, of some small pirate ship, and consequent executions. But outlawed men flocked to Cormac's employ like filings arching around a magnet.

Little that could be done about it, indeed—until a mathematician in the Astronomical Survey Department put an equals sign between two astounding sets of equations. . . .

A SMALL pirate ship plunged through space like a frightened dervish. The atomic gas-thrust whined in high crescendo. 1269 pushed his great grey shape up out of the emptiness, the airlock opened, and Johnny Tandem, tense-faced, dropped the small ship through the opening onto its cradle, where it bounced violently in the clamps. Even before its erratic motion had stopped, even before the gas-thrust died entirely, a strained, harried pirate was out of the airlock.

"Get me Cormac, Nelson," he snapped

at the communications man. Nelson immediately turned, made the necessary connections. The tinny gong rang steadily, and another gong joined with it. The sleepy face of Cormac grew out of the shadows that laced the plate.

His eyes switched to the pilot of the recently returned ship.

"Sure, an' it's Johnny Tandem! Now whut is it that gets me up out o' bed in the middle o' the haythen night?"

"Trouble, Cormac," said Johnny Tandem briefly. "The Old Guard is on our tails, and I don't mean a few of their thick-waisted ships, but the whole damned force. You should see 'em!" Johnny Tandem actually shivered, clenched his gloved hands once, released them. He leaned forward toward the plate tensely. "Cormac, there's a thousand ships if there's one. I swear to heaven, I didn't trust my eyes at first. It looked like they were on a straight-line trajectory that would bring 'em to our front door. I made some calculations, and I can't see any other way—they're headed here, and they mean business."

The humorous look on Cormac's face remained, but his eyes switched from man to man of those who watched him.

"Sure," he remarked presently, "an' ye can't be imaginin' things. But whut causes the fear in yer heart? Ye know that Cormac's 1269 is a well-guarded fortress, bristling with all manner o' rays an' guns?"

"Sure, I know that," said Johnny Tandem, his voice rising a note. "But doesn't the Old Guard know that too? They haven't come at us for years. So if they know that, why are they coming here in full force. They've got something new, Cormac—they must have—it'll knock us from here to Hawaii, you wait!"

"Ah, now," said Cormac very softly, "an' where's the new weapon that Cormac ain't usin' fer himself?" But his face hardened until it became a complexity of interlocking planes. Something flared briefly in his barbarian eyes.

"Nancy, lass," he was thinking, "sure, an' there was something in yer mind that ye've neglected to tell poor ould Cormac? Sure, an' ye knew something that would have broken the heart o' poor ould Cormac, but would have saved him his freedom? Sure, an' the Ould Guard, the haythens, are here to break my poor 1269 into a thousand pieces, an' my lovely beauties with them!"

Suddenly he changed, became galvanized into a mass of supercharged nerves. His nostrils flared widely. He plucked the general communications tube from its socket, blasted out snarlingly,

"Up, ye spalpeens of the luminiferous aither! Up, an' into yer spacesuits. To yer stations! Man yer guns, for something in the wind blows an evil smell into the nostrils of ould Cormac! Aye, the Ould Guard is darin' the might o' 1269, an' bad cess to them for that!"

His voice roared through the branching tunnels, roared through the alabaster palace of beauties, blasted into bed-rooms, into watch-rooms, into the streets. Men started, doubted what their ears heard, but doubted not for long. When Cormac spoke thus, all hell was opening wide its gaping maw. 1269 erupted with activity. Men ran for their suits, buckled pistols around their hips, oxygen tanks around their backs, went with the purpose of a fool-proof plan to their posts—some to communication centers, some to relay controls, a great many outward into the cold of 1269's surface, to take their places in the heavily armed garrison there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Betrayal?

CORMAC stood in his luxurious suite of rooms before his bank of vision plates. His blunt fingers, trembling un-

accountably, played with studs and small switches. The plate swirled. Space gaped in on him, expanded, rushed toward him with the speed of light. A black dot grew on the plate, was centered, rushed up into Cormac's sight, split up into smaller dots, which in turn split and split and split, until—

A thousand ships strong, the Old Guard hurled itself through the ether, at speeds that could be measured in miles per second, at accelerations that were very close to three gravities. Cormac watched gravely, the sweet starting out on his brow. A thousand startled, unbelieving thoughts surged through his waking brain.

"It's not a thing to be believed," he gasped. "It's a fiction in my mind, to be sure! An' fer whut raison do they kem toward impregnable 1269, the fortress o' the wicked Cormac O'Flaherty? By all the spry little gods o' my lost Erin—" and this was a heavy oath indeed "—is it that Cormac is to flee like a whipped dog after all?"

His full lips ripped out startled, unbelieving curses. Again his fingers pressed studs. A gong started to ring with slow insistence.

The plate became blank.

"Come now," said Cormac, sweating, "open yer connections—I'd have a talk with ye, if ye've the manhood to tell me whut's in yer mind, so that the battle may be fair an' square."

But minute after minute passed, and though the commander of that fleet, Commander John Reynolds himself, must have known that Cormac was trying to get in



touch with him, he sent forth no acknowledging signal.

"Come now," said Cormac, sweating, "There's no sense in this, at all at all! Ye've but a million miles to go, an' it's not in me to blast ye out o' space without some word o' pity in yer ear. Ah, thin, ye're breaking yer speed, an' fer why?"

The whole flotilla was indeed ceasing its headlong plunge through the emptiness, and as minute after minute of watching passed, Cormac saw it standing off a mere thousand miles from the surface of the planetoid.

Cormac plucked the general communications tube from its socket once more. "No firin', now!" he warned. "Faith, an' when their nastiness begins, thin's the time to show them our might."

Cormac's immediate subordinate, in charge of the outer garrisons, rang him.

"The big guns are lined up," he reported with formality, "and the rays are set at small aperture for long-distance blasting. We could scatter them now if we went ahead—they'd go back where they came from. If they had anything new, they'd have used it before this—they haven't a chance."

"Sure," acknowledged Cormac, "an' ye're a man o' sound raisonin'. But ye'll watch them nonetheless."

CORMAC moved dazedly to the right, to a local plate, jiggled switches. His strained voice blatted out once; twice; thrice.

"Nancy girl," he called sharply, "an' where've ye gone to?"

The plate suddenly swirled. The girl Nancy Smith was clearly revealed, ponderously clad in the fibrous and metallic bulk of a space-suit.

"I couldn't answer you right away, Cormac," she said. "I was getting into this suit."

"Faith," he gasped, "an' whut fer? Be ye goin' some—"

"You're in one, everybody else is in one—and a good thing, too, Cormac," she answered without inflection, her eyes dwelling with a curiously tense expression on his. "You're going to have to escape—you're going to have to leave 1269, and everybody else too."

"Escape?" he gasped. "Leave 1269? Whut's the manin' o' that, Nancy dear, an' it's Cormac O'Flaherty that commands ye to answer!"

"I can't answer you, Cormac," she said, turning her head away drearily. Her finger moved along the vision bank, and the plate was suddenly blank.

Cormac looked at that plate, and felt as if reason had departed him.

"Ah, faith," he said, aghast, "an' the darlin' has betrayed me! There's no sense to this!"

Two gongs rang simultaneously. Cormac hesitated between one plate and another, leaped to that one which showed the interior of a strikingly appointed control room.

A tall, broadshouldered man, clad in the blue and white of the Old Guard, more technically known as the Interplanetry Police Force, stood visible in the plate. The two of them, wild Cormac O'Flaherty, and Commander John Reynolds, he with the half-smile on his full lips, the knowing gleam in his ice-grey eyes, gave stare for stare.

"Your time is up," Reynolds said presently. "Come our of your hole, you and your men—and the girl Nancy Smith with you—and we'll give you justice."

The hard, absolute planes of Cormac's face scintillated like the facets of a huge diamond.

"No, man," he whispered, sweating, "ye're talking out o' yer head, so ye are. Whut raison, indaid, that Cormac O'Flaherty give up his position? More point, by the powdhers o' war, that you fall back. There's more guns and death on 1269 than you have in your whole fleet."

Reynolds studied him still with that same knowing gleam in his eyes. Cormac watched him carefully.

"Sure, an' he's playin' for time, with his slow talk," his thoughts ran. "An' whut the raison? Oh, I'll not fall into your sly trap, my fine commander," and he turned away from the plate. His numbed consciousness now remembered that another gong was ringing—one of his subordinates trying to get in touch with him.

THE plate flashed, showed the interior of the telescope observatory.

The harried face of the operator, a short, overly fat man, struck at Cormac as with a blow. And Cormac's running thoughts, turning corners, leaping obstacles, with an amazing, abnormal swiftness, caught at the truth before the operator's twitching lips could tell him.

His face greyed. "An' whut's the doom that faces 1269, thin?" he said heavily.

Sweat was rolling from the man's face, in his evident fear.

"403," he said jerkily. "It's coming—it's a collision course!"

"An' fer whut raison did ye not learn of this days ago? Is it that ye watch the heavens around 1269 under false pretenses?"

"No!" the operator chattered in defense. "But there's over four thousand asteroids—I've got a million square miles of sky to watch—it was an impossibility anyway. Asteroids don't crash. You know they don't. There hasn't been a crash in the whole history of man. They travel in separate orbits." His teeth chattered. "Cormac, I still can't believe—"

Cormac, infuriated, said murderously, "You'll stay where ye are. Ye'll check orbits again, an' by the powders o' war—"

The operator backed away, shaking his head swiftly. "No," he chattered, "I checked and rechecked. It's the truth. 1269 is on a collision course with 403, and I'm getting out while the getting's good!"

"Stay where ye are," Cormac commanded again. His hands clenched in his tough space-gloves. "An' ye let the others know this, ye'll fry in yer own fat, so ye will!"

"The others know about it already, Cormac! It's all over the planetoid, and it's every man for himself. You've got fifteen—sixteen point ten minutes," he said, looking at his figures. His frightened eyes came up again. "You'd better get out yourself! Goodbye, Cormac!" He turned away from the plate, left the room.

Cormac raised his fist parallel with his shoulder, sent it crashing into the vision plate, and through it. His glove split open from the tip of one finger almost to the wrist. Cormac stared at it. A tiny stream of blood was seeping out.

"Ah," he thought stupidly, "so it's a collision course the Ould Guard is relyin' on. Bad cess to poor Cormac, he's found his doom."

He sat down before his control board, began rapping out orders. In most cases, he found none to hear him, in others he found men sticking doggedly to their posts, in spite of the fact that another asteroid, as big, almost, as 1269, was on the way.

"Go," said Cormac heavily. "There's little here to keep ye. Gather yer men together, an' make a break fer it. If ye must fight, fight, but flee if ye can, for Cormac knows that in empty space we're not a match fer the dogs."

Johnny Tandem barked at him, "Cormac, get out of there. You're going with us—we've got plenty of time. Should I wait in number three?"

Cormac hesitated. "Have ye seen the girl, Nancy Smith?"

"No—nobody up here has."

"If in twelve minutes I haven't joined ye, thin get on with ye," said Cormac gruffly. "I've a little matther that I must tind to."

CHAPTER FIVE

403 Collides!

CORMAC'S hand stopped bleeding as he went with steady stride through the empty tunnels and alabastered corridors of his recently depopulated city. He walked along with rigid, set expression; never once did he stop to examine the age-old beauties that decorated his halls and his courts; statuary, old masters, tapestries—he did not want to see them.

"Nancy, my lass, an' where've ye gone to?" he muttered.

He entered the main tunnel with long stride. Suddenly he heard a sound before him. Nancy Smith, nothing of her visible except her perfectly hewn, composed face, since she was in space-suit, rose from the floor of the tunnel and faced him.

"I was waiting for you, Cormac," she said. "We can escape together. We haven't very much time left."

Cormac stopped a yard from her.

"Ye knew o' this," he growled. "So ye did, an' 'twas yer love-sick Commander John Reynolds whut told ye. Now whut wull I do with ye—wring yer neck?"

The composure vanished from her face. "No!" she exclaimed, shaking her head as if in pain. "You haven't got time to kill me, even if you want to. Will you try to escape?"

"Aw, an' whut's the use to Cormac?" he said. He stepped forward, wrapped his long, strong arm about her helmet.

"I could crush this helmet, so I could," he said throatily, "an' when ye go out into the cold airlessness of 1269, ye'll be dead on the instant."

Pain entered her eyes. "Let's go, Cormac," she shuddered.

He released her, and her eyes traveled to his hand, where the glove was split. She made an exclamation.

"Aw, an' whut's the worry to Cormac," he muttered.

"You're out on your feet—you're dead to the world!" she whispered.

Her own gloved hands fumbled at her space-kit. She drew out a spool of thin, steel wire, and started to wrap the wire around and around Cormac's wrist, drawing it so tightly that the fibroid texture of the space-suit folded over it. Cormac felt the bite of the thin wire clear through to the bone of his wrist, felt his hand grow into a dead, useless, bloodless thing.

"Now come," said the girl, looking him straight in the eyes. She turned and ran at top speed up the passageway.

Cormac followed her, without effort keeping pace.

They came to the opening of the tunnel. Cormac worked the valves. The airlock swung open, and they entered. Force of habit made Cormac close the inner door before he opened the outer.

"Your hand is going to hurt," she whispered, shuddering.

The outer door swung open. Air soughed out, blew at them, shoved them toward a spiral staircase. The first pain hit Cormac's hand. He set his lips; in a while his hand would feel nothing, and the pressure in his suit would remain.

They traveled the staircase upward until they stood on a platform that overlooked the jagged surface of planetoid 1269.

CORMAC looked out and over the planetoid. A hundred yards distant a ship darted out from number three garrison at furious velocity, lost itself in space. Other than this, there was no sign of life.

Cormac looked at the girl. "Nancy, lass," his moving lips said, "we're alone on 1269, so we are, an' without the time to find us a ship—for look over yer decavin' head, an' off to the right. Sure, an' it's none other than 403 that's comin' at us."

She turned her head, saw what Cormac

saw. A comparatively huge, jagged mass literally occulted a third of the heavens, cut off sight of the Sun itself.

And as she looked, it grew bigger. She twisted her body around toward him again, her lips trembling, her composed eyes giving way to an unconcealed terror. She threw herself at Cormac, wrapped her arms about him; and even through her space-suit, he could feel her trembling. He wrapped one arm about her tightly—the other seemed dead.

Cormac said, "Now, now, lass, an' ye wouldn't crack at this when already ye've faced the terror o' the space ways, Cormac O'Flaherty, without a whimper out o' ye? Now, there's the girl, that can smile when death rushes at her! Now whut's life, indaid, that doesn't end with a crash, an' suddenly, with could space around ye, an' the stars a-starin' at ye, a low gravity to make ye feel strong an' corageous? Whut's life indaid to him who cannot die a brave death? Sure, an' ye have enough stuff in ye to make a true Irish lass yourself. Ye kem out o' Ireland, so ye did, though the records doubtless give ye birth in America, the ould haythen country that it is!"

She finally did look up at him, and smile through her tears.

"There's something about you that's wonderful, Cormac," she said. "You're the biggest human paradox I ever met. They made a mistake when they called you a terror I don't think we'll die. I know it."

"Ah," said Cormac aggrievedly, "An' ye wouldn't dream o' life when there's a glorious death that awaits us? Arrah, the crash is here, so it is. Augh, Nancy, it's the beautiful things o' life, sich as yourself, that I'm a-grievin' for—"

The universe split. Consciousness departed. Hell-sound raged through the cosmos. 1269 staggered, tilted, careened, split wide open, crumbled, churned, exploded into ten thousand separate pebbles, boulders, and chunks. The invading monster demolished itself similarly. All the belongings of Cormac O'Flaherty, all his stolen beauties, were ground up into indistinguishable pieces. The fragments of 1269 and of her demolisher spread outward in a cloud through space. Wedged into a crack on one of the larger pieces, the still bodies of Cormac O'Flaherty and Nancy Smith were clasped tightly together.

CHAPTER SIX

A Hard Escape

COMMANDER JOHN REYNOLDS was still a young man—he was not quite thirty years old. For six hours, he had remained in his control room, directing his flagship in an exhausting search. His face, normally handsome, stronger than the faces of most men, was now haggard. Long since he had issued orders that sent the rest of the fleet home, with their lists of captured pirates, and pirate ships. His flagship alone hung on the edge of the holocaust that was 1269 and 403; and now and then the ship had darted in amongst the grinding fragments.

His direct subordinate, an older man than he, entered the room.

"You'd better get some sleep, John," he warned.

Reynolds sighed. "I was hoping we could find the girl," he said. "I was in love with her. And I think she was in love with me."

"I know, John. Wasn't there some way of getting her out of there before the crash came?"

"I thought she'd get away with O'Flaherty. Funny. She knew that 1269 and 403 were due for a crash. Yet she didn't tell O'Flaherty. She was a brave—" He stopped, came to his feet, his face draining of blood.

"What's that?" he whispered.

A section of one of the ruptured asteroids was limned clearly in the vision plate. The section was turning. Reynolds looked again, and could have sworn that he saw a moving figure.

He sat down, barked into the pilot tube. "Follow the one that just passed us, before it gets away!"

Cormac's hand was dead and swollen when they got him into the ship. He lost consciousness when they took off his suit. When he awoke, he knew he was in ship's hospital; he knew also that his hand had been amputated. He sobbed once, and went to sleep again. Three days passed. Cormac stared at the ceiling, tormented. Reynolds, and the doctor could get no word out of him. Nancy Smith did not come, though the only question he asked was of her.

"She's safe," Reynolds said.

On the fourth day of her trip to Earth, Cormac lay flat on his bed, his good hand cuffed to the post. It was dark in the hospital save for a small lamp in the corner. The doctor was elsewhere, and Cormac was alone.

He heard a step behind him and raised his head.

"Sure, an' it's Nancy," he gasped, and then he stopped and turned his eyes from hers.

"I told you we'd live," the girl said, whispering. "Why don't you look at me, Cormac."

"Because my sowl died with 1269," he groaned. "Oh," Nancy, lass, sure an' I'm a dead man! They're takin' ould Cormac back to Airth, an' they'll put him in a jail, and fer the rest o' his miserable life he'll see all the cold loveliness of the stars blanketed off by a haythen atmosphere. There's nothin' more to Cormac at all at all! Throth, Nancy, it's no life fer a wild Irishman to live, an' him lovin' the freedom of the open spaces as he does. Walls —cages—how will Cormac stretch his arms, much less his thoughts that used to soar like a glorious aigle with its wings outspread over the sparklin' waters o' Lough Mask, an' the wooded stretches o' Cunnemara? Sure, an' there's nothin' but sadness I have to look at from here now on."

Her voice was still a whisper. "Did you want to go free, Cormac?"

HE TURNED around toward her with a single movement, his eyes searching her, probing through the tears.

"Free, Nancy, lass?" he gasped. "Free? Ah, ye're jokin'—jokin' with ould Cormac!"

"No, Cormac. I mean it. I mean every word of it. If I can work it, you'll be free, and in the next few minutes, too."

He gripped her hand with his manacled one; then his eyes fell.

"No, Nancy, lass, ye be dramin' again," he sighed. "There's naught a poor lass like yourself can do fer the likes o' me."

He started to draw his hand away from hers, but she bit her lip tensely and held onto it, while with the other hand she took a small key from the pocket of her blouse. There was a clicking sound. The manacles fell away. Cormac leaped noiselessly to his feet. He snatched the key from her, and crouched a few feet away.

"Arrah!" he growled, "an' stay away from me, Nancy! Get ye to yer room! Ye've had naught to do with my escape, d'you hear? Be off! An' fer all who ask, faith, I stole the key, picked it from yer precious commander's pocket—they'll believe such tales of wild Cormac O'Flaherty!"

She smiled at him dazzlingly. "One more thing I've got to do. You could find the combination to the airlock, I guess, but before you did, the guard would be making this round of his beat—too bad for you. Thanks anyway, Cormac. Come on."

She went hurriedly from the room, Cormac following. They debouched into a

corridor, with the back of an officer turned to them at the far end. She hurriedly pushed him back into the room. She walked a dozen yards down the corridor, turned into the airlock tunnel, worked over the combination lock set into the wall. There was a clicking sound. Machinery whined faintly. The banked door started to open.

She said nervously, "The lifeboat."

"Aye, I know," he said throatily. "But it's more than my escape I think of now, when I must bid ye goodbye ferever. Sure, an' do I know why ye've done it?—why you've loosed the terror o' the system?"

"You're hardly a terror, Cormac; and besides—I like you a great deal, she murmured."

TINY muscles in Cormac's face tensed; he made a spasmodic effort to draw the girl to him, but she kept one hand flat against his chest.

"Sure," he said brokenly, "an' I love ye, lass. It's not an admission that Cormac makes with joy, fer when he has lost you, he has lost half the beauties o' his life to come, so he has. Arrah! By the powdhers o' war, is this Cormac O'Flaherty that speaks? Whut's 1269, with all its riches an' beauties? Whut use the stars, an' the glorious Sun that lit the life o' Cormac? I' throth, I'll give it all fer Nancy an' a hut on Lough Mask! By all the spry little gods of Ireland, it's a hard freedom that Cormac O'Flaherty takes now; an' his Nancy's face wet with honest tears!"

"Go now," the girl said with difficulty. "I do like you, Cormac, very much, and I hope that someday we'll see each other again. But I hope you don't have to kidnap me just to see me—Oh, Cormac, can't you turn over a new leaf somehow?"

Cormac drew away from her. "Get ye back to yer room, Nancy," he said heavily. "I' throth, my conscience bothers me, so it does, to have ye sich a dishonest lass."

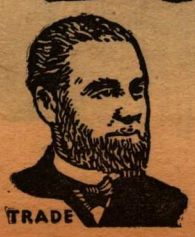
She moved away and said, "Goodbye, Cormac," and that was the last of her voice he heard.

The airlock door clicked shut. He was left alone, and he put the moments to good use—simple to open this outer door, simple to clamber into the tiny ship, simple to work her controls, even with only one hand.

The ship flicked out, stood off, and then, under an acceleration of a full five gravities, snapped away from her monster parent in an opposite direction; and so swiftly did she disappear, that Nancy Smith, looking pensively through her port, never saw Cormac O'Flaherty take his leave and his freedom. But she knew he was gone, and she wondered if the dreariness she felt then would persist forever.

THE END

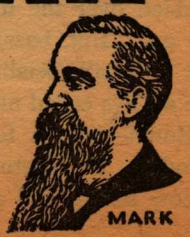
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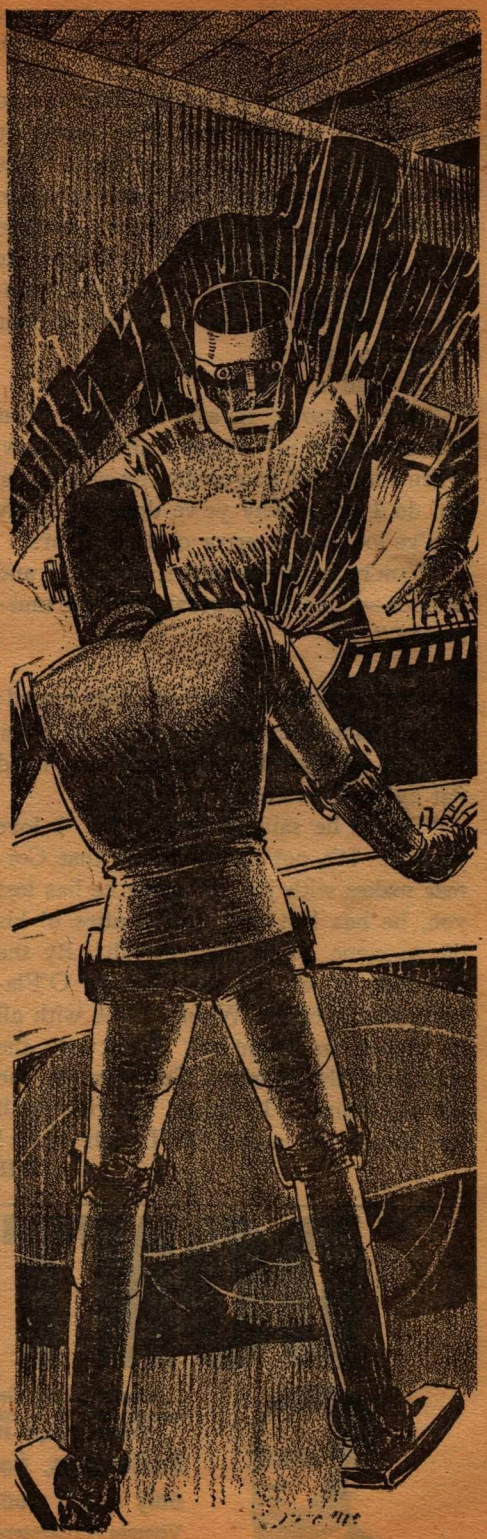
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Buckethead

By Arthur G. Stangland

Butch wasn't as erudite as the robot of his master's rival, but he had learned a few odd tricks to make up for that.



HERMAN PINSCH fumbled with distracted attention at his ample chin, and gave a worried glance out the window. Walking down the road toward his one-acre plantation was a middle-aged man. And close at heel bobbing up and down like a donkey's head was a dull chrome-metal robot.

Neighbor George Flint, and Aladdin, his buckethead. You couldn't miss.

Pinsch tapped his nose wisely. Hm. The old bloodhound had seen the delivery bring the tell-tale box yesterday, containing his robot from Ward-Sears Mailorder House. And now he was coming over to smell around.

Pinsch turned and fixed a speculative eye on the new robot behind him whose metal skin gleamed a little too brightly—like a highly polished dollar watch.

"You understand everything I told you, Solomon?" he asked.

The robot's chest gave a little squeak as he twisted his head around and looked behind him. Then he swung back to Pinsch. "Who's Solomon, boss? I don't see nobody."

Pinsch glowered at him. "That's you, that's your new name—Solomon!"

"Sola—Solm—Solemnon," the robot stumbled over the unfamiliar name. He gave up. "But, boss, Duke—he's th' guy what they call socialized me at th' factory—he always called me Butch."

"Butch—bah, a fool's name!" Pinsch exploded. He gestured at the window. "Now listen, and get it straight in that

pot head of yours. This is my neighbor coming with that walking encyclopedia of his that he calls Aladdin, and I want you to watch your p's and q's."

"Pee's and kew's?" Butch repeated, bending over to stare at his bulky legs. "What's them, boss? Never heard o' them."

"P's and q's—you know—watch your step," Pinsch fumbled for it.

Butch slowly swung his head back and forth and hunched up his shoulders. "But when they learned me to walk, they said to forget my feet. They's something called a balancing gyro inside o' me that helps me walk."

"No, no, I mean you should be sure to remember everything I told you to say and do when they come," Pinsch said.

"I'll try, boss, but Duke said that even for a buckethead I'm kinda dumb an' can't remember things long unless they's said over an' over."

"All right, all right!" Pinsch said irritably, nodding his head at the robot. "Just try and do your best, because if I know George Flint at all, he's brought Aladdin along just to show you up—and I don't think he'll have to try very hard," he muttered to himself as he went to the door.

He swung the door in. Standing there was an iron grey haired man with a square face and small eyes that squinted into the room. He was remarkably free of age lines, and except for having flesh he looked as impassive as the robot at his heels.

"Hello, Herman," he sounded off, looking all around the room, anywhere but at Pinsch. "Aladdin and I thought we'd come over to welcome the newcomer."

IT WAS when he spoke that the resemblance between George Flint and his robot was most manifest. He talked without moving his lips, like a ventriloquist. It is said two human beings take on similar appearances from long association. Like two old bachelors, Flint and Aladdin had lived together ten years.

"Gettin' kinda thoughtful for an old man, ain't you?" Pinsch said. "Well, come in."

Inside, Flint found Butch standing stiffly at attention like a butler. He looked him up and down with close scrutiny.

"So you're Pinsch's new buckethead, eh?" he said through unmoving lips.

"How do you like it?" Butch intoned. Then he started to bow his head. In the middle of the bow, he stopped and a grating squeal of clashing gears burst from his inner works. Then he lifted his head again and leaned far back.

Startled, Flint stepped out of the way. "How do I like what—your tin belly?"

Pinsch's face was twisting like a man swallowing castor oil. His hands balled up into fists and unclenched again, useless articles for the moment.

"No, no, George," he stammered. "Solomon means 'how do you do?' " He stepped forward and rapped on Butch's protruding midriff. "Stop it, Solomon. You bow forward—not backward!"

Butch straightened up. "Oh—oh, I thought it was the other way around."

Something like a snort came from Flint as he turned away. "Got as much sense as the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz," he muttered. He crossed the room and sat down. The small eyes contained a crafty, sly expression as they fastened on Pinsch. "What do you want with a robot on this place, Herman?"

Pinsch didn't look at his caller. He managed to make a business of straightening a throw rug at the entrance as he said, "Oh, it's getting kind of lonesome around here, so I thought I'd get me one."

Flint tilted his head at the ceiling and let go with a rolling laugh that startled both robots out of their immobility. "That's a fairy tale of the first water!

You spending money on a robot just for company? No, Herman—hah!—I can't imagine that. When a man cuts his own hair, and half starves himself just to save a few dimes, he doesn't spend his money on such a luxury as a robot. In fact, I strongly suspect you keep your money hidden on the place around here."

"That's my own business, George, that's my own business," Pinsch said emphatically. "Can't a man buy a robot without his neighbors sticking their noses in the deal?"

"Of course, of course," Flint agreed. "But why buy a delicate, complicated thing like a robot out of a mailorder catalogue? It's like buying a jewelled watch. You go to a dealer in good watches. When you want a dollar bargain you go to the corner drug store. Robots like Aladdin don't come any better nowadays. He remembers anything I tell him —marvelous powers of memory, infallible. Just for example—" He centered his gaze on the robot. "Aladdin, recite Hamlet's speech—'To be or not to—' "

HERMAN PINSCH shoved his hands deep in his pockets, and looked aimlessly into space. Here it came, the real reason for the visit—the show-off.

Aladdin stiffened where he stood, his lucid photocells directed outward as if he were addressing a vast audience. Then in a deadly monotonous voice he began: "To be or not to be—that is the question: —Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?"

"That's enough, Aladdin," Flint interrupted. He looked at Pinsch who stood behind a chair absently picking at a frayed edge of the upholstery. "What do you think of that?"

"Yeh, pretty good all right," Pinsch agreed, in a voice that somehow conveyed an apology for Butch's behavior.

"Pretty good? Why, it's perfect!" the other exclaimed, getting to his feet. "You'll never get that kind of performance from a mailorder buckethead." He started across the room. "Let's have a good look at this pig-in-a-poke you bought, Herman."

Like a man buying a horse, he stood off and ran a critical eye over him. He waved a negligent finger.

"For one thing his stance is bad; that bending at the knees shows too much sprung weight."

Pinsch rose to the defense. "But that allows for a flexible movement."

"Yes, flexible like an old fashioned spring scales—and about as dependable." Flint walked around the robot who stood as rigidly at attention as he could. "And look at the thickness of those arms and legs. All taken up with old style locomotion designing—heavy bushings instead of rubber, sectional eccentrics and inefficient solenoids. Positively a frightful waste of space."

"Yeah, but he can get around just as good as Aladdin!" Pinsch said sulkily.

Flint stopped behind Butch, running his eyes from heels to head. Suddenly he clapped his hands just abaft the robot's right ear. Butch continued to stand erect without moving.

"There Herman, did you see that? No reaction from him. Means too much resistance in the audio circuit—probably used old fashioned copper wire to get by cheap instead of the newer thermic-skin paraloy."

"He wasn't too deaf to hear that horse laugh o' yours awhile ago!"

"How much did you pay for this fugitive from a junk pile?"

"Eight hundred."

"Eight hundred! And even then they gyped you," Flint exclaimed. "I paid two thousand for Aladdin—and he's worth it. All you've got is a power-eater on your hands."

"He's good enough for what I want him for," Pinsch grumbled.

"He's good for nothing, you mean," Neighbor Flint jibed. He looked slyly at Pinsch. "Why, Herman, I'll bet a dinner in town that that tin can of yours hasn't got sense enough to go out in the garage and bring back a Stillson wrench."

FOR a moment Pinsch fidgeted. If he backed down, it would be an admission of defeat and the story would spread all over the valley. And if he accepted, Butch would be sure to bring back the wrong thing. Still, he couldn't let Flint come over here and make a monkey of him.

"All right," he said. "Let's make it a race. Butch and Aladdin. There's a couple of wrenches on the bench out there. First one back wins."

"It's a bet."

Pinsch turned to Butch who stood with his back to the wall taking in the conversation. "Now, Solom—er—Butch, I want you to get out to the garage and bring back a Stillson wrench as quick as you can. And don't spare the horses!"

Butch bent his round gleaming head. "You mean ride out there on a horse like a cowboy telemovie I seen once?"

"No, no, I said hurry out to the garage and come back with a Stillson wrench. Forget the horses."

"All right, boss, I'll try an' remember."

Flint never even spoke to Aladdin. He didn't have to because the robot was all ready to go. Pinsch opened the door and the two robots, their insides humming, strode forward. Together they crossed the porch, but, at the first step, Butch missed. His right foot hit the second step with a bang, but his gyro kept him on even keel. They crossed the yard and Aladdin was first to open the door.

"Stillson 'rench — stillson 'rench," Butch was repeating to himself.

Aladdin stopped inside the door and swung around to stare at his kin. "What you saying that over and over for? Can't you remember it?"

Butch stopped and turned his head slowly toward the other. "No, that's the trouble," he said. "Duke—de guy wot made me—says they's something wrong wit' the magnetic retaining coils."

Aladdin turned toward the bench, stepping around the front end of the bullet nosed, broad bellied car standing on the floor. "How you ever expect to hold down a job here then?" he asked.

"Duke says I'm different a little from the other bucketheads he's made," Butch defended himself. "He told me maybe I ain't got much memory, but he put something in me that works like human motors —endocrines he calls 'em. Says they help me a little to think like human beings."

"Bucketheads aren't supposed to think," Aladdin scoffed. "They're supposed to do what they're told."

Butch watched Aladdin fumbling around the bench. He knew if Aladdin started back first he would win, and he didn't want that. There must be a way to get back first. Then, down inside him the magnetic storehouse of memory released a deeply impressed thought.

"TROUBLE with you older bucketheads is you never learn anything new," Butch began craftily. "In fact you're afraid to learn anything but what your boss says to."

Aladdin revolved his head toward him. "My master says I am the smartest robot in the country—I can learn in the shortest time."

"Bet you never learned how to get drunk," Butch said in an offhand manner.

"Drunk?" Aladdin put down a wrench, and come over with an almost human attitude of curiosity. He was always curious about new things, new words. "Drunk? What's that?"

Butch moved over to the car. This was

one of the forbidden things Duke had taught him while drunk himself one night. Getting a robot drunk was a new wrinkle that had appealed to his addled brain.

Butch lifted the rear engine hood and peered inside, with Aladdin looking curiously over his shoulder. He found what he was looking for.

He pointed to the positive and negative terminals of the battery. "Touch them and you see real pictures like they say humans see—imagination they calls it."

Aladdin stretched out both hands and shorted the battery. Instantly he was galvanized where he stood. From his mouth came a garbled flow of words.

"What'd . . strung current for . . make my head hum . . nice buzz . . "

Without waiting anymore, Butch stepped over to the bench. "Stillson wrench . . wrench," he kept muttering in his metallic mouth.

At last he found the wrench and picked it up. Then he stood blankly staring at it. What was he out here for? Here was the wrench but why? He began to get a little panicky. Certainly he was out here for something.

"To be or not to be—thatz question afore the house . . " mumbled Aladdin pressing his chrome fingers even harder on the terminals of the battery.

That was it, Butch remembered then. He had to take the wrench back into the house. He moved out toward the entrance and started with a squeaky step toward the walk.

A car moved up alongside him so silently that he didn't notice it until a voice hailed him.

"HEY, are you old Pinsch's bucket-head?"

He turned around and looked into a pair of close set dark eyes peering at him. The mouth below it was a mere narrow slit in a pocked face. He compared those eyes with other similar eyes he had seen on nights out with Duke. "Look out for guys with eyes like them," Duke had warned him.

"Yes," he said in a lowered voice, and began to move on. The car moved also, keeping abreast of him.

The voice turned oily smooth. "Hm, with a suit of clothes and pair of shoes a guy'd think you was a human being."

Butch tried to edge away. He was afraid of humans. They thought and talked so fast that he mistrusted all strangers. Then he saw a gun in the man's hand. Duke had said that when a man pointed a gun, you hit him first and asked questions afterwards. He lifted the wrench a little.

"Aw, Mike, show some sense," a second towheaded man in the car said. "Robots don't have feelings like us—you're wasting talk on 'im. Work 'im over without the honey; we gotta find out where the dough is before tonight."

Butch raised the wrench arm high and backed against the fence. It was the only thing he could do or think of. He couldn't run, because he couldn't control his legs good enough. He was trapped.

"Look out, Mike, he's going to throw that iron!" the towhead yelled. The other brought up his gun and rested it on the window ledge.

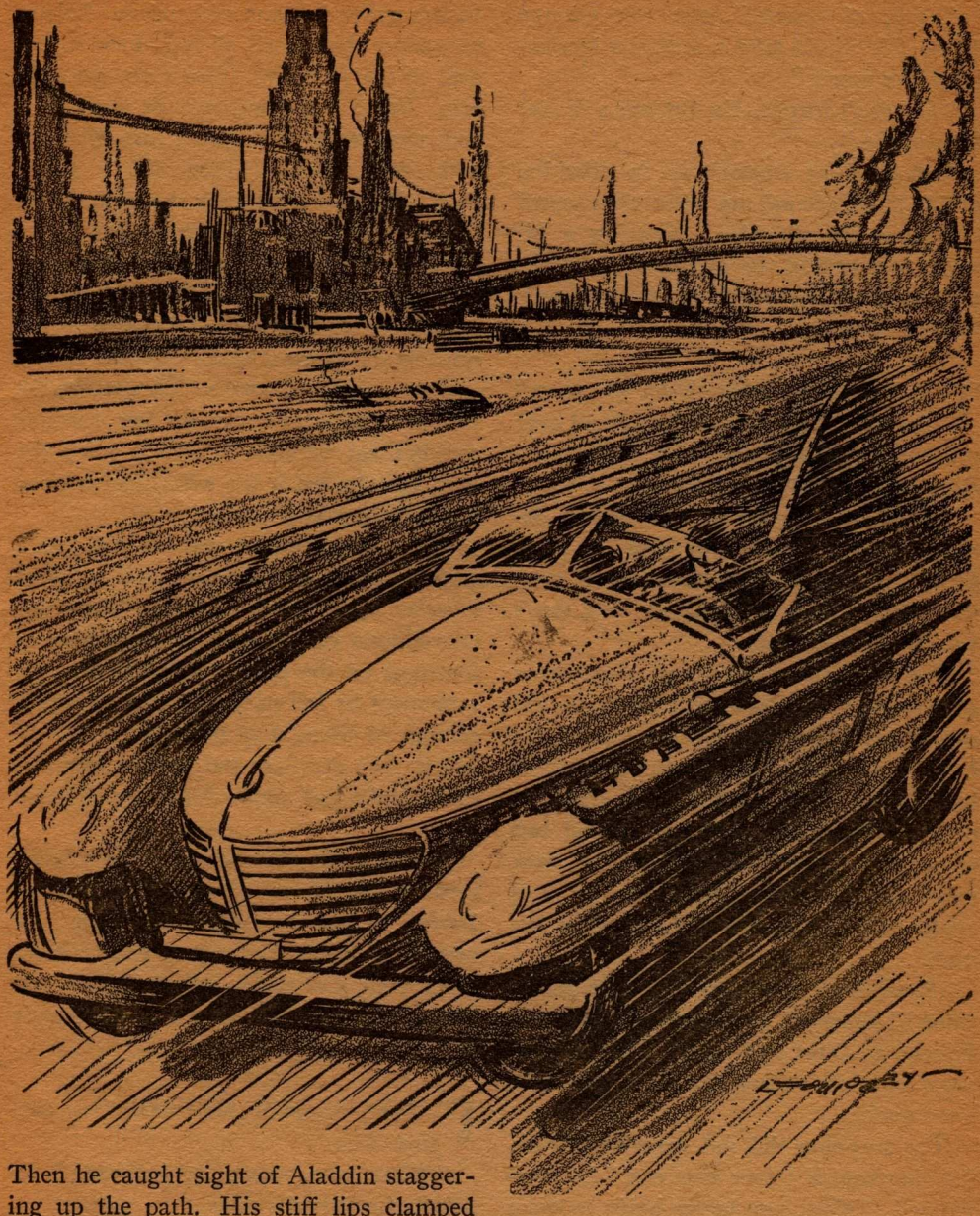
At that moment Aladdin came lurching out of the garage making a noise like a run-away calliope. The electrical clearing house for motor messages to his limbs was jammed by magnetism, and he walked with the grace of a drunken sailor.

"Forget it, Mike," said the towhead, "there comes another buckethead. We got to burn rubber!"

The car shot ahead and disappeared down the road on silent wings.

Butch looked curiously at the magnetically drunk Aladdin, and then walked up the path to the house. As he entered, Flint stared at him as if he were a ghost.

" 'Pon my word and honor!" he gasped.



Then he caught sight of Aladdin staggering up the path. His stiff lips clamped shut and his eyes bulged out.

"Aladdin!" he barked. "Stop that silly act at once!"

"To be or to be—what's the question?" the robot was saying as he stumbled up the steps. "Hello, boss!"

"What have you done anyway? And don't call me boss! If you were a human being I'd say you had been drinking!"

"Butch—he can think, boss, really. He taught me how to—to be or not to be that's—no, no, signals off. Le's see, le's start all over again. He says put your fingers across the terminals of the battery and you get drunk."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Pinsch from the doorway. "A drunken buckethead! Who'd ever think of that?"

"Sure, of course," spat out George Flint. "It would take a lowbrow buckethead like yours."

"An' don't forget—the bet was a dinner for tonight."

George Flint stepped up to Aladdin, grabbed him around the waist, then tossed him over his shoulder. Weaving a bit under the weight, he managed the steps and crossed the yard to the highway leading home.

THAT evening, before Flint was to call for him, Pinsch decided to go all over the robot's duties with him again, considering his behavior of the day.

"Solomon—er—Butch," he began, deciding to be practical in view of plain facts, "I suppose you remember your main duties around the house here, don't you, when I'm gone?"

The robot turned his small microphone ears to hear. For a long moment he did not answer his master. But up in his head a throbbing transformer hum from his bundles of wire brain lobes signalled deep concentration. Then his round ball of a head turned left and swung back again to the right. He came to dead center with his photocells focussed on the man.

"Boss, have you ever forgotten something?" he asked, getting to the point obliquely, as Duke had taught him. It's always strategic to link the other guy with your guilt.

The response did not surprise Pinsch. "A dumkopf if I ever seen one," he complained. "Now, you better begin to show a little something on the ball, Butch, or else."

"On the ball—or else?" the robot repeated. There was a long moment of self communion. "Isn't something supposed to come after 'or else'?"

Pinsch was exasperated.

"Yeah, or else you'll find yourself sitting out in the rain, rusting to death." Pinsch ground it out with relish. "Now, remember that small sliding door in the wall of the hallway? That's my life savings. While I'm gone, you sit there with your eyes on it. You guard that currency with your life—" That didn't sound right. Pinsch fumbled for the right word, "—er, don't let anyone come near it."

After Pinsch had gone Butch sat on a chair in the darkened hallway. Equipped as he was with cat's eye infra-red photocells, he didn't need lights on in the house.

Funny things, humans. This money for instance. Couldn't eat it, but humans couldn't eat without it. They piled the stuff up—traded it for what they wanted instead of trading directly.

For a long time he just sat still like a statue, the rod linkages and solenoid muscles quiet within him. Then his microphone ears picked up the sound of footsteps on the porch, heavy steps. For a moment he felt panic, because strangely enough he thought of the gunman named Mike. The gun had put fear in him, because Duke had shown him what it could do.

Through the dark he could see a bulky form at the door. Should he sit here? Better to get up and investigate. He moved as quietly as compact rubber cushioned rods and shafts would let him. At the windowed door he peered cautiously out.

IT WAS Aladdin. He relaxed his caution then.

"What you want, buckethead?" he asked through the door.

"Let's both get drunk this time," Aladdin proposed.

Butch opened the door, and the other stepped in. "I'd like to, but boss says I gotta keep my eyes on the dough, or else."

"Dough? Whoever heard of a buckethead making dough?" asked Aladdin. "Our masters are out for the night—can't we relax from a day's work too? I get

awfully hot memorizing all the things my master recites to me, just to say them when we go out."

But Butch had a sense of responsibility. "No, we got to figger this problem like a human. Duke would say you should think what he calls logical."

"What's that—a special way of thinking? Why go to all that trouble—just let the money stay there while we go out to the garage," Aladdin suggested in all simplicity.

"No," Butch said stubbornly, "there must be some way to guard the gold and still go out to the garage. Duke always said there's ways and means of getting out of things and making it look legal. That's why humans got lawyers to talk faster than other humans when they do something wrong and then make it look legal."

The magnitude of the problem was too much for Aladdin. He whose mentally sheltered existence had never demanded the solving of a knotty problem. You let humans do the thinking for you. They did it much faster anyway.

"I tried to think like a human once," he said, "but I burned out a whole relay circuit from head to biceps solenoid. It cost my master lots of money to fix it, and he said if I tried to think like a human again he'd sell me to the army."

"Well, I had to learn to think," Butch said. "Duke got drunk o' Saturday nights and it was up to me to get de guy home."

For a half hour he stood immobile while his head got tremendously hot and his power batteries went lower and lower with the labor of thinking up a new idea. The problem had awful implications too, because the Boss had said if he left his post he would stand him in the rain to rust to death.

At last he moved. "I got it," he announced, heading for the hallway.

So long had they stood silent that Aladdin had almost forgotten that Butch was pondering the problem. "Got what? What's the matter, buckethead, you burned out a fuse or something?"

Instead of explaining it, Butch acted out his solution. When Aladdin discovered what he was doing, he shook his head as he had learned from his master. "Must be wonderful to think by yourself and not depend on a human for your ideas."

AFTER a laborious half hour's work they were ready to go out to the car garage. This time it was Aladdin who lifted the hood to the engine. He put his fingers to the terminals and uttered a sound of robot pleasure. Butch stood at his elbow and touched his shoulder taking the juice through him there. Minutes ran into hours until the electrolytic in the battery had lost all its strength.

At last Aladdin and Butch were stretched out on the floor dead to all stimuli, so magnetized were their metallic bodies.

Toward midnight Flint stopped his car in front of Pinsch's place.

"You must've been starving yourself for a week, you ate so much!" he growled at Pinsch. "Seven-fifty for a dinner!"

"It was a pretty fair meal," Pinsch said, getting out. "I think it—" He stopped talking, and stared toward his house. "My front door is open!"

He hastened across the yard and leapt up the steps. Flint followed him at a slower pace and heard him swearing when he reached the front door.

"I've been robbed—my money is gone!" Pinsch was shouting. "And they must of stolen Butch too."

Out in the garage Butch stirred on the floor where he had collapsed.

"What's all th' noise?" he asked of the darkness. He got to his feet slowly and staggered against the wall. Below him Aladdin pulled himself to a sitting position.

"What's what?" he asked, with a fuzzy tone to his metallic voice.

"Noise in the house." Butch started out of the garage and into the path of the car lights illuminating the yard. Behind, staggering after him, came Aladdin.

Suddenly a wild eyed Pinsch appeared at the front door. As soon as he saw the two robots reeling across the lawn he let out a bark like a hound baying up a tree.

"Butch! You good for nothing hunk of tin, I'm going to break every joint in your worthless body!"

George Flint put out a restraining arm. "Wait a minute, Herman," he warned. "Destroying a buckethead is against the law—they're military necessity in war time, you know."

Pinsch jerked away his arm. "All right! Then I'm going to send him back to Ward Sears and get my money back. He's just a worthless, no-good pile of walking junk!"

"No, I ain't," Butch contradicted.

"Well, you fell down on the job, didn't you? While you were out there soaking up that damned juice, someone was in here robbing me my life savings."

"I didn't fall down all the time I was there," the robot protested. "I was sitting. I remember that well."

"You remember nothing!"

"Well, I remember some of it, but not all. Seems like there should be more, but I can't remember what it is," Butch said lamely.

"Look out! Don't try too hard," Pinsch said sarcastically, "or you might strain that peanut brain o' yours. Then the company would hold me responsible."

HE DESCENDED to the basement and brought up the big packing box that Butch had come in. Busily he went about extracting the bent nails on the edges and driving back those still in the top panel.

George Flint had stood Aladdin up in a corner where he couldn't sway off his feet. Then after a sharp-tongued lacing he turned on Pinsch.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied now." He was so mad that he even moved his lips when he talked. "I told you you had a lemon; but no, you had to trust him, just to get a free dinner off of me."

Pinsch's ears burned but he didn't answer. Methodically he went on with his work. At last he stood up with a sigh. The crate was all ready for its occupant—like a coffin. He turned around to the robot.

"Too danged bad them thieves didn't steal you," Pinsch said, "it would've served them right."

He reached a hand around to a knob between Butch's shoulders. The robot was talking, and excitement was in his voice.

"Boss, now I know where—"

But with the turning of the knob his voice stopped dead, and the robot slumped like a man killed in his tracks. Pinsch caught him under the arms and dragged him to the crate. Carelessly he stuffed him into the box and placed packing around his body. Then he nailed the top down solidly.

"There," he said finally, standing up.

Flint had his hand on the door ready to go, and Aladdin tottered at his side.

"I'm warning you now, Pinsch," the man said. "If Aladdin's delicate brain circuits have been permanently injured I'm holding you responsible."

Then he and the robot left the house.

Dejectedly, Pinsch sank down on the box top, too tired and worn out by the disaster of a lifetime to answer. If it wasn't such expensive revenge he'd have relished taking a sledge hammer to Butch—the danged gadget-puss. There was some—

"Okay, Gus, get on your feet!"

Pinsch looked around at the sound of the strange, harsh voice. Behind a muzzle

of cannon proportions, he saw a dark man with close-set eyes and a narrow slit of a mouth. Beside him stood a towhead with a steady gun in hand.

"About time you was showing up!" the dark one growled. "We been waitin' here an hour. Where's the dough?"

Pinsch stood up slowly, too fascinated by the guns to take his eyes off them. "I haven't got any more,—somebody's been here already."

The dark one moved slowly up to Pinsch, a glitter in his eyes. Suddenly he reached out, grabbing Pinsch by the throat and shaking him. "Don't give us that. Come on—where's the dough!"

Pinsch gurgled and choked a moment after the other let go. Then he said, "I don't know—I always kept it behind that small door in the hall."

The towhead spoke up. "Y'see, Mike, it's like I been tellin' you. Dopey Dick beat us here. We're wastin' our time when we oughta be chasing that weasel!"

"Okay."

The two went out the door fast, while Pinsch sank down on the box top again, utterly exhausted this time.

THE truck was there early in the morning.

"Be sure you get it on the ten o'clock rocket express," Pinsch told the driver. "The sooner that box leaves here the better I'll feel."

"Okay, we'll see she's on it."

Over at Flint's house Aladdin and his master were out in the potato patch hoeing. As the truck came by from Pinsch's Flint said, "Well, there goes Herman's robot—and an awful expensive one. Also a damned bad influence on you."

Aladdin looked up from his machine-like rhythm of hoeing, but said nothing. The dog house was his abode right now!

After a half hour's work when the two were heading back to the barn, Flint spoke again.

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"How soon did Herman's robot come over here for you last night—right away I suppose?"

Aladdin hesitated. "He didn't come over, master. I went over there."

"You went over there!" Flint exclaimed. "Hm. Worse than I imagined. Then when you got there he was waiting for you, eh?"

"Well, no." Aladdin was silent a moment. "He was watching the money in the hallway. And then I—I suggested that we go out in the garage. But he had to figure out how to guard the money and still be out there. He did it, too. But it took us some time to get the bottom plates off his belly."

Flint stopped in his tracks. He grabbed the robot by the arm. "You mean that Herman's robot is carrying all his money right now!"

"Yes."

Flint gulped that awful fact down. Pinsch had to be repaid for Aladdin's bad influence on Butch right now. He hurried out to his car then, slammed the door and started the motor in one motion. He was up the road in a minute and braked to a rubbery stop.

"Herman!" he yelled without getting out.

Pinsch came slowly to the door. "What is it now?"

When Flint told him, he landed on the pathway in one jump. Flint held the door open for him, and he shot in like a prairie dog into his hole. They had ten minutes to get to town and down to the field.

THEY arrived at the Transcontinental Air express field just as the rocket ship let go with its first blast out in the middle of the big square.

"Too late!" Pinsch groaned. But in the next breath his voice rose on a note of hope.

The ship did not start off the field with its usual sudden blast. Something had gone wrong with the initial blast. Maybe there was time to catch her before she left. They rolled up to the low flat roofed buildings of the express company.

Suddenly a man came running from the offices yelling: "Hey! Roll your windows down or they'll shatter—the express is going to blow!"

Pinsch turned his head in time to see three men racing across the field from the ship. Beside him Flint was rolling his windows down. "Stop your ears!" he shouted at Pinsch.

The next moment the express disappeared in a blinding flash of light and an invisible giant hand slapped them with terrific force as the concussion wave struck. When the dust cleared, all they could see was a big crater where the ship had been.

The first thing Pinsch said was, "There goes my money—the sweat of a lifetime!"

The clerk from the office stood up beside the car, a thin wisp of a little man and wiped his brow. "Whew! Those guys were lucky to get out. Short circuit must've set off the fuel tanks." He turned to Pinsch. "Say,—about that stock robot you were returning to Ward Sears, Mr. Pinsch, it's lucky we didn't send it."

For a moment the full import of his words did not penetrate. Then Pinsch said excitedly, "Hey, what'd you say—you didn't send the robot on that ship!"

"No, I've been trying to get you for the last ten minutes. You paid the express man the same rate it cost to send it to you, but we found out it weighs more now by about ten pounds and that takes an extra sixty cents. You used more packing than they did, I guess."

Pinsch climbed out of the car and steadied himself with a shaky hand on the door.

"I'll say I did,—expensive stuffing, too."

THE END

WATER PIRATE

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Water was the life-blood in the veins of the Solar Civilization, and someone, powerful and mysterious, was intercepting the shipments!



IT WAS early in 2418 that the Solar System realized that there was a Water Pirate. The great tanker ships, carrying water to the rich dry-world mines and colonies, began to vanish from the space-lanes, with their convoys. The Trans-Galactic Convoy Fleet, which for two hundred years had kept the space-ways safe, was suddenly helpless. Ships and men vanished without a trace or an explanation, and there was no clue to be found.

For four solid weeks not a drop of water got through. The storage tanks dropped lower and lower; a panic fear of thirst swept the dry worlds. The Interplanetary Trade Marts shook in the wind of that fear, and the economic system trembled with it.

Old Johan Gray, Chief of Special Duty of the Convoy Fleet, played his last card. His son Jaffa went through the worst hell-spots of the System, searching for something that might show them some way to fight.

And on a moon-washed Martian night, Jaffa Gray stood in the shadow of the Valkis slave-market and cursed, bitterly

and softly; a stocky, strong-boned man, his square face hard with the failure that he had at last to admit.

For the first time in the two days he had been in Valkis, he took off his peaked spaceman's cap, wanting the desert wind on his head and not giving a damn who saw his trademark—the broad streak where his hair had come in white over a scar. He raked his fingers through it, swearing out the last of his vocabulary; and a voice said out of the darkness: "Jaffa Gray!"

He whirled, his heat-gun blurring into his hand. A boy stepped into the moonlight. His arrow-straight body was clad like Jaffa's in dark spaceman's leather, but where Jaffa's dark hair was cropped short, the boy's rose in a shining crown, bound with the thin metal chains that marked him already a warrior in Kesh, a barbarian state in the Martian drylands.

Jaffa's face hardened. He had seen that gleaming pile of hair almost everywhere in Valkis. "All right, Keshi, you've caught up with me. Talk, and talk fast!"

The boy came closer, fearless of the gun, and his words were a breathless whisper. *"I can take you to the Water Pirate!"*

JAFFA stood like a graven image. He had risked his neck on an invisible trail. The last possible covert had drawn blank. He had been going home defeated; and now Fate dropped the whole thing neatly in his lap! His lips curled in a silent laugh. His left hand shot out to clamp the Keshi's tunic in a throttling grip; his right jammed the gun-muzzle in the boy's ribs. "Now," he said easily, "what's your game?"

The Keshi didn't flinch. "You are Jaffa Gray; I was sure when I saw your hair. You are hunting the Water Pirate. I can take you to him. There is no game."

Jaffa's eyes blazed. "If you were telling the truth. . . ."

The boy grinned in his face, a fighting grin. "Feel my chin, Jaffa Gray, if you want proof!"

Puzzled, the Earthman slid the fist of his gun-hand along the upthrust jaw. His breath hissed in sharply. Intently he retraced the jawline, ran downward along the smooth curve of the throat. Then he let go of the tunic abruptly, as though it had burned him.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" he whispered. "A woman!"

"Now do you believe?" mocked the low voice. "Would I have risked Valkis to tell you a lie? What would those wolves do to me, if they found out? I need you, Jaffa Gray, and you need me!"

The white lock gleamed as Jaffa's blunt fingers rumpled it. Then he nodded shortly and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I'll take a chance," he grunted. "Let's go. We can talk aboard my ship."

The Kallman two-seater was ready to fly. Behind the bolted space-port they were safe from spying, and the warrior-girl of Kesh told her story in rapid sentences.

"My name is Lhara. My brother Lhar was pilot on one of the tanker ships that disappeared. The Water Pirate holds him prisoner, along with the men from the other ships, but one man escaped. My brother sent me a message by him; told me to find you, because you were the one man in the System who could bring the Water Pirate in.

"The pilot, who escaped in one of the Pirate's own ships, was to have helped us. But something went wrong; we crashed, and he was killed. You've got to fix the ship."

"Why not just use my own?" asked Jaffa.

"How close do you think you'd get to the Pirate's hideout?" returned Lhara impatiently. "Besides, it has much better weapons than any of our ships."

Jaffa's ears pricked. "Who exactly is the Water Pirate?"

"I don't know. None of the men has ever seen him."

Jaffa nodded. "Where did you crash?"

"Near the Teka range, about three hundred miles from here."

"Just a minute," demanded Jaffa suspiciously. "How'd you get across the desert to Valkis?"

The girl's grey eyes were contemptuous. "I am a Keshi." She touched the chains in her tawny hair. "I have earned these honestly. It was not hard to steal a *thak* from a village across the first range. I rode to Valkis."

Jaffe shook his head. "You win. But warrior or no warrior, if you're lying to me I'll wring your pretty neck. What's your position?"

He was admiring the pretty neck as he slid the strato-wings out of the hull and set the air-rotors going.

"BY THE Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" Jaffa shoved back his cap and whistled. "Where did this crate come from?"

He was standing in the open port of a wrecked space ship, lying at a slight angle in the red sand of the Teka desert. It was the weirdest ship he had ever seen, and he had seen plenty. A flattened oval, rather than the familiar cylinder of the System, the alloy of its metal and the use of various gadgets projecting from the hull were both a mystery. Inside, the control cabin was furnished with queer low couches and upholstered all over with a peculiar silky stuff that flowed in quavering patterns of green and blue and brown.

A small ship, carrying four at the outside on a long voyage.

To Jaffa's right as he stood was the control panel, and beyond it, the buckled bow-plates that had sustained the brunt of the crash. Ahead was a wall pierced with thick quartzite visiports. To his left was a bulkhead; the heavy door into the rear cabins was closed. And at his feet. . . .

At his feet was the maddest thing of the whole crazy ship. Covering most of the floor space was an oval pit some six feet deep, tiled in a pattern of outlandish marine growths. It was bone dry; whatever moisture had been there had long ago gone out into the dry Martian air. But it was undoubtedly a pool of some sort, and Jaffa wondered profanely what lunatic would cart a swimming pool through space.

He whirled as bolts shot to behind him. Whirled; and dropped in a jointless heap on the narrow floor. Lhara looked grimly down at him, the paralysis-gun that Jaffa had not taken from her steady in her hand. Mutely, Jaffa raged. He had not disarmed her, for there was no way beyond actual imprisonment to keep her from the Kallman's gun-rack; and Jaffa had been reluctant to risk alienating her help. Also, he had had no real reason to believe she lied. Now he could have kicked himself.

From a locker she produced manacles and chained him securely, wrist and ankle, taking his gun. "I'm sorry, Jaffa Gray," she said steadily, as she stood at last over him. "That was an unworthy trick. But I have told you no lie. My brother is a prisoner, I need your help, and I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Then she was gone, out into the desert.

JAFFA glared bitterly after her. The paralyzing charge had not been strong, and the life came back into him quickly. He struggled against his chains, knowing it was useless. Then he lay still, too bitter against himself and Lhara even to curse.

After a bit there came a thundering shock that rocked the desert under the ship. Sand pelted against the ports, and the sagging bow-plates shook in the surge of ruptured air. Jaffa swore. Only one thing could have made that explosion; Lhara had bombed his Kallman. His only hope of escape now lay in this queer ship that he must make fly.

The girl came back, carrying a bundle of Jaffa's things, her hair shaken in a tawny veil across her shoulders and full of sand. Subconsciously Jaffa saluted the courage it had taken to heave a sub-atomic bomb into the ship and then lie in the sand with that explosion roaring over her.

Lhara freed his hands, lengthened the chain between his ankles so that he could walk after a fashion, the paralysis-gun ready to topple him if he made a false move.

"Go look at the damage, Jaffa. You'll find everything you need here. And I advise you to hurry."

He went, grappling the problem of why, if Lhara had been telling the truth as she said, she was acting this way. She must have gone to a good deal of trouble to track him to Valkis, for he was not in the habit of leaving guide-posts behind him; and she hadn't done it simply because she needed a man to repair the ship, or even to fly it. Almost anyone else would have answered that purpose as well as he. There was something more behind it, something damned queer.

He tried to solve the mystery by the simple method of asking questions. But Lhara, along with the chains in her hair, had learned a warrior's trick of keeping her jaw shut.

He learned nothing.

The damage to the ship was not great. The bow-plates had been broken so that the cabin was not space-worthy, but the instrument panel had not suffered much. The pilot had died of a broken neck, according to the girl. Jaffa studied the controls. Unfamiliar in pattern, they yet bore a resemblance to those he knew, and the ship ran on the same vibratory atom-smashing principle. He nodded in grim admiration as he saw what had made the disappearances of the tanker ships and their convoys possible. A powerful vibratory field was created by means of exterior electrodes, neutralizing the vibrations in the atom-smashing units of the System ships, rendering the engines useless. The vibrations also blanketed the radios, preventing communication. After that, the huge electro-magnets simply clamped on and towed the helpless ships like fish on a line.

A queer, wonderful ship. But he knew he could fly it; and given the proper materials, he could fix the damage in two days.

"Of course," he added, when he made his surly report to the girl, "if the mechanism of the ship has been sprung or damaged. . . . "

"It hasn't," she assured him, and he wondered how she knew.

That night the two of them bunked in the control cabin. Jaffa never thought of being alone with a woman. They brought up their girls to be men in Kesh. Lhara simply chained her prisoner securely, lay down and went to sleep. The door in the bulkhead remained closed. Jaffa tried more questions, but finally gave up and went to sleep too.

Sometime much later he came awake, not starting up, but simply ceasing to be asleep. Both moons were up, shooting crazy shadows across the narrow floor and the dry pool. Lhara's couch was empty.

Jaffa realized suddenly what had waked him. There was a sense almost of fog in his nostrils, a warm moisture faintly tinged with an unfamiliar smell. The dry, cold air sucked it up before he could analyze it. But it had been there; and Lhara was gone.

He sat up. His ankle-chain passed around a stanchion, but from where he was he could see that the bolts of the space-lock were shot from the inside, and the hatch into the engine-rooms below was locked.

His eyes fastened on the bulkhead door. Lhara was there, behind it; there was no place else for her to be. Something else was there, too, something that made

warm moisture in a climate drier than the Earthly Sahara. What?

Jaffa lay awake, waiting, trying till his head ached to answer his own question. He lay so that he could see the door and still seem to be asleep; when at last the heavy door swung cautiously open, he held his breathing to an even rhythm, though he strained every sense to see what was beyond.

Nothing. Just darkness, against which Lhara's unbound hair shone like a silver cape in the moonlight. But there came again that gush of moist warmth that had wakened him, and the strange odor was a thought stronger. Then the door swung to again, and the thirsty air swallowed all trace.

Lhara stood over him a moment, listening to his breathing. Then she went back to her couch; and in spite of his rage against her, Jaffa dreamed of her, and pleasantly.

TWO days of hard work saw the bow-plates once more tight. That evening Jaffa faced the Keshi girl.

"All right," he grunted. "Your crate will fly. Now what?"

"Now you try it." Lhara shot the space-bolts home. "Take her up. If she's all right, go on. If not, come back and finish the repairs."

"Had you thought we might not be able to get back?" asked Jaffa dryly.

Lhara's jaw set. "Those are the orders, Jaffa Gray."

"Yours—or someone else's?"

"That doesn't concern you." The ever-present paralysis-gun motioned him to the pilot's seat. Jaffa shrugged and obeyed.

He switched on the air-pumps and the purifying system, watching the gauges intently. The needles held steady for a moment, then wavered back to the danger point.

"What is it?" askd Lhara sharply. "Cut in your rockets!"

Jaffa pointed to the gauges. The girl's eyes hardened abruptly with suspicion. "The pumps were all right when we tested for tightness an hour ago."

"You can see them now," retorted Jaffa indifferently. "If you go up with them this way, you'll not live two hours."

She wavered a moment, for the first time uncertain. She suspected a trap, but she knew nothing of machinery. In the end, she gave in; there was nothing else to do.

"All right. You'll have to go below and fix them, and you well know there's only room for one down there. But hear me, Earthman!" Her grey gaze was steel-hard, her jaw stern. "You can't escape from there. And if you make a single false move, I'll drop you in your tracks!"

Jaffra shrugged and slid his manacled feet down the hatch.

A single narrow runway ran between the great bulkheaded power units, back to the fuel feed and the vibration chamber, where the special heavy atoms were smashed to power the rocket tubes. He found the air unit without any trouble, stood staring speculatively at the gleaming mass of machinery. There was nothing wrong with it; he himself had caused the reaction on the gauges. But there was an idea at the back of his mind, an unformed thing made of closed doors and cryptic actions and warm moisture in cold, dry air. With the queer inventiveness of a man on the brink of a mysterious fate, something had occurred to him; a fantastic thing, that might, just possibly come in handy. Anyway, it was all he could do, and anything was better than nothing.

He set to work with quick, sure hands. For nearly an hour he was at it, answering Lhara's shouted questions with surly plausibilities. When at last he climbed the ladder back to the control chamber, there was something in the air-unit that had not been there before.

He took the strange ship up, testing her

in every way and finding her sound. Lhara gave him his course; he stared at it, raking the white streak in his hair with blunt fingers.

"The Asteroid Belt, eh? Trust the Water Pirate to do something no crook has done since the Fleet got its long-range detectors thirty years ago! I'll be interested to see how he does it!"

"BY THE Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" Jaffa said it, very slow and soft. Impossibility was manifest before his eyes.

Mars was back of them, across the curve of space. All around them the Asteroids hurtled on their far-flung way. Ahead, where Jaffa, under Lhara's pistol-enforced order, was steering, was a tiny world-pebble a mile or so in diameter. It seemed a long way to come to commit suicide, but Jaffa held the ship steady, straight for the barren surface.

Then the impossible happened. Emptiness yawned behind a back-slid portion of the asteroid itself; Jaffa, goggling, took the ship in. The strange space-door closed behind them.

"We must wait until the air is replenished," said Lhara, as though she were reciting a lesson, and Jaffa waited, staring.

A vast space had been hollowed in the rock of the asteroid, probably with powerful disintegrators, and fitted out for a hangar. Ranged neatly in ranks were the convoy ships that had vanished with the tankers; of the clumsy tankers themselves, there was no sign. There was no other ship like the one he flew, and Jaffa smiled. That fitted his embryonic theory. The floor was sheeted in metal, and he guessed at magnetic gravity plates.

A green light flashed against the wall. The Keshi girl got up and shot the space-bolts back. "Come," she said, and Jaffa, shuffling in his ankle-chains, followed obediently.

Lhara guided him, muttering directions under her breath as though she had memorized them. There was a barrack-room where men of the Convoy Fleet sat in strange, quiescent alertness, like robots of flesh and blood. Lhara's eyes went in anxious pain to a tall Keshi in the uniform of the tanker company; but there was no recognition in his face, and she did not pause. Then there was a little terminal room where a car waited on a curved trough. Lhara motioned her prisoner in. Then she pressed a button, and the car shot down a green-lit tube straight for the heart of the asteroid.

With a dizzying, vertiginous suddenness, the car shot out of the metal tube into one of glass. Space opened around them—space filled with water, swarming with queer sea-creatures, suffused by a curious pale radiance. Jaffa realized, with a suffocating sensation, that the water filled the whole hollowed-out center of the asteroid.

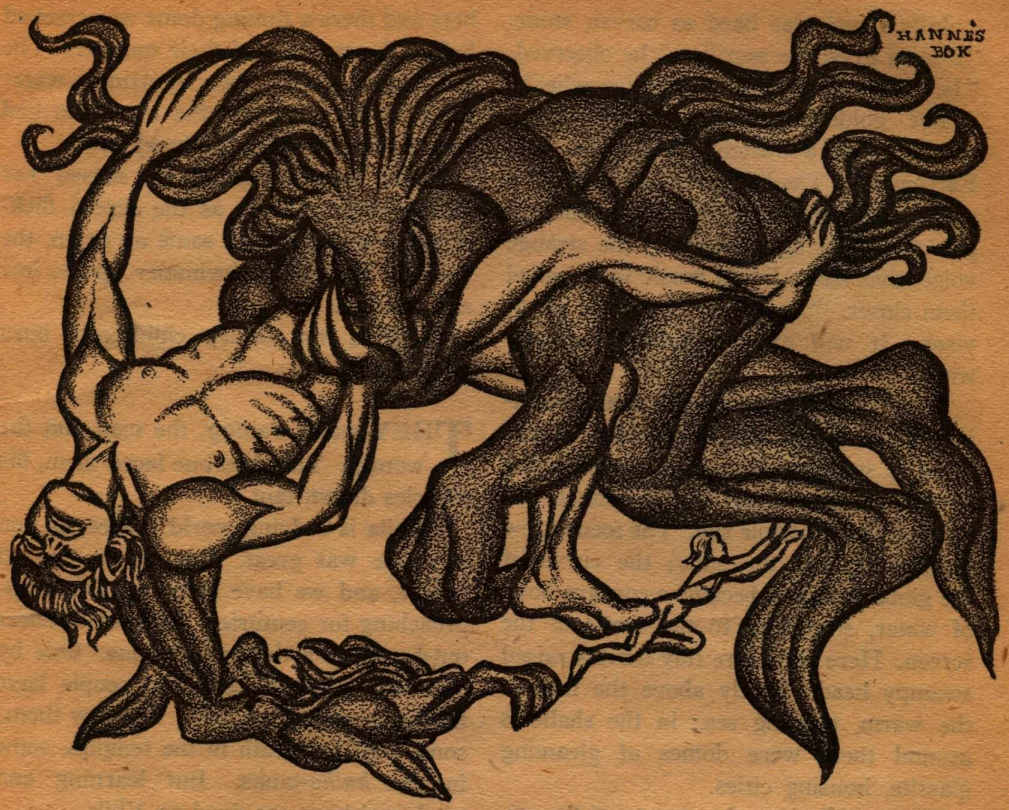
Lhara's face was set and pale; he could not read her expression. But her knuckles were white on the grip of the ray-gun, and her breast rose to deep-drawn fighter's breathing.

There were glassite buildings ahead in the water's blur. The tube went straight into one, closing transparent walls around them. They went down a ramp and into a small room, furnished as the spaceship had been, and at Jaffa's feet there was a sunken pool, broad each way as two tall men.

Jaffa followed the Keshi girl through swinging doors into a room that stretched vastly under curving crystal walls. Intricate mechanisms, control panels, coils and vacuum tubes and gigantic things of cryptic identity filled every foot of available space; there were ray lamps and heating apparatus and rack upon rack of cultures in gleaming tubes.

And there was water, in a deep sunken pool tiled green and brown in a pattern of water-weeds.

Lhara led her captive to the brink of the pool and stopped. They stood wait-



ing, and there was a silence like a holding of breath in the laboratory.

THE water in the pool stirred suddenly, lapping against the tiles. Far down, cloaked in the rippling refractions, a solid something moved, sending a stream of crystal bubbles up along the surge of the disturbed water. Something that was swift and sure and graceful; something that gleamed with a golden sheen as the light struck it; something that was panther-lithe and supple, and had areas of shimmering iridescence at its extremeties. Jaffa's blunt fingers raked his white-streaked hair and did not feel it.

The head broke water.

A strange, unearthly face. Fine golden fur-covered features that were strong and clear and as streamlined as a space-cruiser. Eye and nostril were fitted with protective membranes, and there were no outward ears; but Jaffa, looking into fire-shot dark eyes, knew that this was a man, with no taint of the hybrid in his blood.

In one light surge the stranger gained the tiles beside the pool. The close golden fur that covered him shed the water in glistening streams down a smooth-muscled body, as human in shape as Jaffa's own, save that at wrist and ankle there were fanlike membranes. There was a strange, triumphant fire burning in the swimmer as he stood looking at Jaffa; and the Earthman realized abruptly that Lhara was trembling.

"You have done well, girl," murmured the golden Being, and Lhara's voice burst out of a tight throat.

"Give me my brother and let me go!"

The water-man might not have heard her. His dark gaze was fastened on Jaffa. "The gods are with me!" he said softly. "I shall succeed."

Jaffa's face was hard as carven stone. "I seem to be the sacrifice," he observed. "Is it permitted that I know for what?"

The golden swimmer swung about, reaching for a switch, "I'll show you, Earthman!" The light went out, leaving a suffocating blackness. After a moment a pale square of light gleamed; the strange voice, that had a liquid music in it, called them closer. "Look here, into this ultra-visor. It will explain better than any words."

Jaffa looked, hearing the taut breathing of the Keshi girl beside him. Something, a spinning blur, took shape in the screen, resolved itself into a planet, revolving about a triple sun. The focus drew in, blotting out the suns; the curve of the globe flattened, became a concave bowl of water, stretching to the limits of the screen. Here and there tiny islands raised swampy heads, barely above the face of the warm, teeming sea; in the shallows around them were domes of gleaming glassite, housing cities.

Closer still; into the streets of the under-water cities, where there were great buildings fallen to ruin and disuse, all save the temples. No children played, and the homes were desolate. Only the temples had life—and the taverns. There were as many taverns as they were temples, and here the sunken pools were filled with stuff that was not water; those who wallowed in them were mere sodden, licentious hulks.

The cities faded to show writhing undersea forests, growing on oozy mud. Amongst the towering fronds of weeds and the amorphous bulks of giant sponges swam monstrous shadows, things with gills and dorsal fins that were yet not fish. They were to the beings in the cities as the apes are to man, and their faces were bestial beyond anything Jaffa had ever seen. They swam around the glassite domes, nuzzling the transparent surfaces, glaring hungrily at the men within; and here and there a shining dome was cracked before the strength of their numbers. The sea-things rode the spurting water through the rifts, and the men who had time to drown were the lucky ones.

Lhara gasped, and Jaffa sensed her averted head. Then, as the screen flickered out and the light came up again, the voice of the golden swimmer spoke, low and sombre.

"I, Rha, was the last child to be born on Vhila."

THEY stood waiting, the man and the woman. The alien one faced them, his muscles drawn taut.

"Vhila is a dying world. Once, as you saw, she was great. But we are an old people, and we have seen our doom approaching for centuries. The sea-dwellers out-breed us a thousand to one. One by one our cities fall, and my people have fallen too, under the load. You saw them; some wait for death in the temples, some in the *kulha*-tanks. But learning and work and hope are dead on Vhila.

"Can you understand that, Earthman? A world of living dead! No future, no life, just a dumb acceptance and an endless waiting. I revolted. I lived alone in the empty colleges, the laboratories, the museums; I learned all the ancient knowledge of my race. And I turned my eyes to your solar system, where I dreamed of a new life for what remains of my people. When I was ready, I took a spaceship from the museum, stocked it with the tools I would need, but no weapons, for we are a peaceful race.

"I landed first on the Venus. You can guess why, Earthman; we are amphibious, taking water through the skin. We cannot live in a dry world. But instead of the peaceful welcome I had expected, I was attacked and driven off. The people feared me. They would have killed me if they could. I knew then that my people could not come in peace. We are alien.

"I found this asteroid, and changed it to suit me. Then I studied your system more thoroughly, by means of the ultra-visor, that I might find means to conquer it. I have no wish to kill, only to force recognition of my wishes and to gain the power to carry them out. I found that your civilization rests basically on the water trade that permits your far-flung colonies to live. Fitting, was it not? I could prey on this water trade, bring you to the brink of destruction, and then make my demands. Under the circumstances, there could be no refusal."

Again the fire-shot eyes rested on Jaffa. "The gods have been kind. So far I have succeeded."

Jaffa raised his head. "Where do I fit in?"

Rha smiled. "I need a hostage, to insure that my demands are believed, understood, and carried out promptly. You are the son of Johan Gray. The Chief of Special, I have learned, is really the most powerful man in the System, for he sits at the secret head of all the activities of the planets. To him, through you, I shall make my demands."

Jaffa nodded, his eyes hooded behind dropped lids. "And if he refuses?"

Rha sighed and spread his hands.

For the first time Lhara spoke. Both men started. Her voice was sharp and fearless as a sword, and the paralysis-gun was steady in her hand.

"I've been a fool, Rha! I knew none of this; only that if I brought you this man, you would cure my brother and let him go. I thought you were only a clever bandit, and I was willing to barter with you for my brother's life. If I had known, I would have killed Lhar with my own hands before I would have obeyed you!"

She flung quick words over her shoulder at Jaffa. "I am sorry, Earthman, for what I did. Stand by me now!"

Rha did not flinch. "You cannot escape. The doors are closed, and my pilots, who are my slaves since I injected them with a special hormone, guard the hangar. Only I can take you out of here."

Wills met and locked. Then Lhara bowed before the truth. Rha took the gun from her unresisting hand.

"Now," he said. "We will go out again in my spaceship, away from here so that my position cannot be traced by the radio carrier-waves, and contact Johan Gray. You will not be stubborn, Jaffa, I am sure."

Jaffa's eyes were still hidden, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. He asked: "Why did you come back here at all? You were aboard the ship back on Mars."

"You guessed it, did you?" Rha nodded as he led the way out of the laboratory. "The Martian air is so dry I couldn't leave my cabin, and I was afraid if you knew, you'd try something. An unfortu-



The whole Earth was not big enough for both the human race and the Tweenies, the super-intelligent Earth-Mars halfbreeds — so the peace-loving Tweenies left for a voluntary exile on the dank, steaming planet of Venus. And even to that place the hatred of the Terrestrials followed them, until the Tweenies enlisted the aid of the primordial monsters of Venus itself and drove off their pursuers. Don't fail to read "Half-Breeds on Venus," Isaac Asimov's lead novelette in the December issue!

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nate thing, that smash-up, especially the pilot's death. But I had to have you, Jaffa, and I had to have Lhara to get you.

"I came back here for two reasons. The water, air, and food were nearly exhausted; but particularly I wanted you to see my stronghold and my laboratory, so that you would know I made no idle boasts. Vhila has scientific secrets your people won't guess at for several centuries yet."

THEY made a silent trio on the trip back to the hangar. Rha picked up three armed pilots from the barrack-room. He smiled at Lhara as he motioned her into his ship, saying: "I feel safer with you where I can watch you." Then the ship roared out through the space-door. The bulkhead door was closed, and the pool in the control cabin was newly filled.

At a safe distance Rha brought the ship to a standstill. And as the throb of the motors died, Jaffa came to his feet. His chains clashed as he hurled himself in a desperate dive for the control panel. Before anyone could stop him, he had landed all his weight on a knife-switch set beside the controls, smashed it down to the end of its slot.

Down in the bowels of the ship there was a grating clash. The water in the pool began to bubble and hiss, and a whitish gas rolled sluggishly over the brink to spread across the floor. In the time it took Jaffa to regain his feet, it had covered the floor-plates and was lapping the ankles of the thunderstruck people who watched it.

"That gas," said Jaffa steadily, "is highly explosive. I should advise the men not to fire their heat-guns."

Rha snapped his orders. "Take him—but don't fire!"

The three pilots moved forward like plastic robots. Jaffa faced them; without shifting his eyes he called to Lhara, "Keep your head above the mist!" Rha stood quietly, waiting, but his eyes were on a switch above the one Jaffa had thrown, and he said "Hurry!" very quietly.

The white gas billowed sluggishly at their wrists.

The rest, afterwards, was a blur to Jaffa's memory. One man missed his footing on the narrow floor and vanished into the pool. The other two came on, holding their heat-guns clubbed. The Earthman caught a glimpse of Lhara, stalking like a panther behind Rha. Then he had grappled the two pilots and gone lurching down into the sea of mist.

The swirling opacity blinded him; he held his breath while he struggled, praying that his chest wouldn't burst until he had what he wanted. The pilots fought doggedly to hold him while they regained their feet. But Jaffa had the desperation of a man clutching his last chance; and he knew that above the rising flood of gas, Rha was reaching for the switch that would mean defeat.

His hand closed on a flailing heat-gun. His head was ringing, his lungs burned with the agony of suffocation. Dimly he knew that one man had fallen limply to the floor, unconscious. He wrenched desperately at the gun, knowing he couldn't last much longer. The distorted face close to his loosed a burst of breath that set the white gas swirling. Then the empty lungs sucked in; the hand went limp.

With the last of his strength Jaffa surged upward. The gas had risen; how high? Above his head, perhaps. Perhaps it had choked all air from the cabin, pouring up faster than the air-conditioners could work. Perhaps Rha and Lhara were lying under it, dying of anoxia. And suddenly, through his pain and desperation, Jaffa knew something. The hard-held air in his lungs broke from him in a cry.

"Lhara!"

Like a swimmer, his head broke the surface. The gas lapped his chin, but there was air still. He gulped it in. Rha's head

was rigid above the rising tide, and behind it, Lhara's, her hair fallen in a bright cloak that gleamed through the mist.

Jaffa raised his gun and fired.

IN A crackling fury of sparks the flying controls fused to a blackened ruin. Jaffa lurched forward, dragged at the switch above the one he had pressed before. The handle scorched his palm, so near had the destructive blast come to it. A gurgling rush came from the pool, and the gas sucked downward in a sullen whirlpool. Jaffa leaned weakly against the bulkhead, and knew that he was laughing at the two thunderstruck faces.

"Dry ice!" he gasped. "I diverted carbon dioxide from the air-purifiers and improvised a compression unit with one of the pressure tanks. Then I connected the compression-tank release with a cut-in on the feed-pipe for this pool, the only one that can be emptied from the control panel. When I pulled that switch I dumped about ten pounds of dry ice into the water. That gas was the released carbon dioxide, perfectly harmless, except that it can suffocate."

Lhara released the arm she had been holding in a vise-grip behind Rha's back; the grip that had kept him from getting to that all-important switch and wrecking Jaffa's plans. Together they got the men up above the last of the gas that hovered above the empty pool. When they were breathing properly again, Jaffa turned to Rha.

"You realize your position. Very soon after I radio, Fleet ships will come to take us in tow. In the ordinary course of events, you will be destroyed as a danger to the welfare of the Solar System.

"But I don't think you are a menace, Rha. I think you're a very courageous man, and a great scientist; and on those grounds, I'll make a bargain with you. My father, as you said, has influence. I think, after I explain, that I can persuade him to arrange a colony for you, provided you give your word to live in peace. And that's what you really want, isn't it, Rha?"

"I ask only a useful life for my people." For a long, long moment Rha looked into the Earthman's eyes. Then he bowed his head, and his voice was deep as he answered:

"I accept your offer, Jaffa Gray."

Jaffa sighed relievedly and turned to the radio. Lhara sat on a couch beside it.

"You'll go back to Kesh now?" he asked abruptly.

"As soon as my brother is free." She faced him frankly. "I'm sorry for what I did, Jaffa. But since it's turned out this way. . . ."

"I think," said Jaffa, "If I were to come to Kesh, and you were to try very hard, I might forgive you."

THE END



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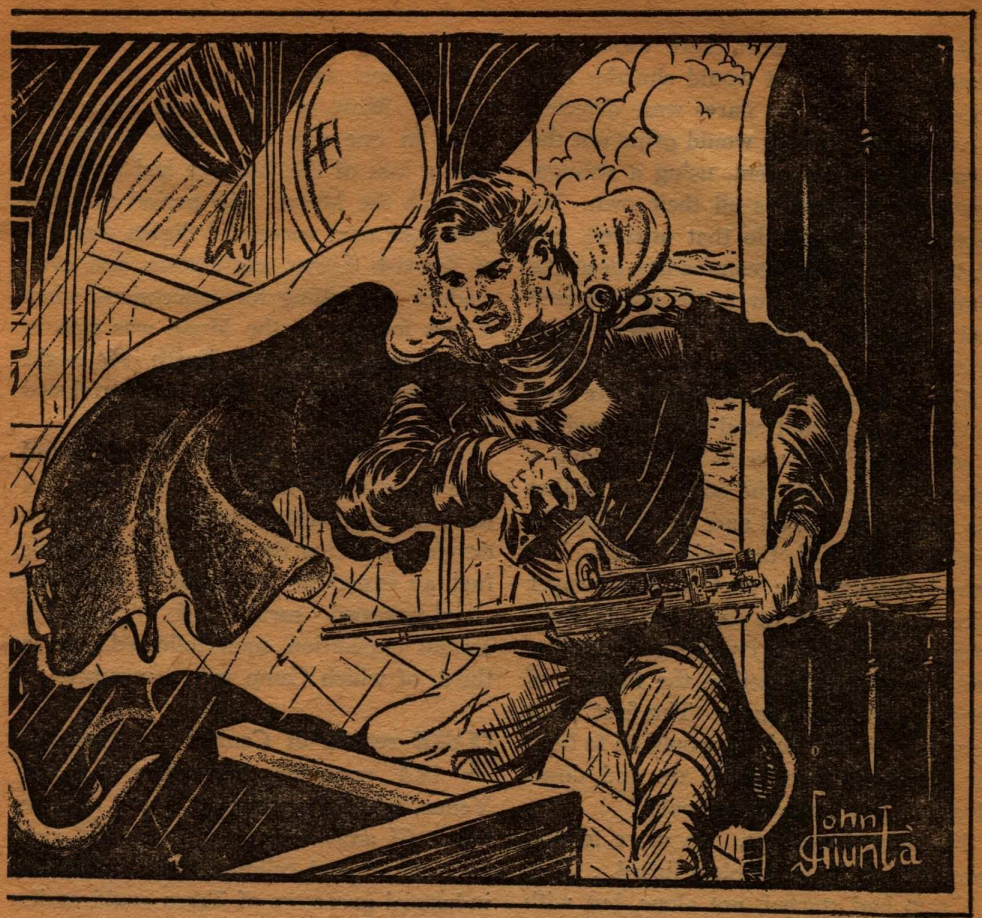
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VACANT WORLD

August Camp got no greeting committee when he returned from his flight to Venus—not even a radio-guide for his uncontrollable ship!

By DIRK WYLIE





CHAPTER ONE

Return from Venus

"HAPPY New Year," Marvin said bitterly.

"Shuddup!" g r o w l e d Camp, trying to chuck a weightless book at him. "Him" was the talking lizard, tentatively christened *petrosaurus parlante veneris,* and generally sworn at as Marvin. Camp sorely regretted the day he had ever taught the little creature to talk; now its jeering, strangely booming voice was never still. He would have stuffed it if he had had the courage to kill it first, but in many ways August Camp was a sensitive man.

Marvin silenced, except for his eternal, sarcastic chuckle, Camp turned again to his log book. "Final entry," he wrote. "September 17, 1997. Approximately one hundred thousand kilometers from Earth at the present time, 10:17:08 A. M. I shall set the robot pilot for Newark Landing-Field, wavelength IP twelve, and the Third Venus Expedition will be over."

He locked the manuals and swung a cover over their multiple pins and contacts, and threw the switch that would put the ship under the guidance of the Newark beam. A space-sphere couldn't be landed easily—not, at least, without outside assistance. There were nearly one million factors too many, all of them interacting, which had vital bearing on the dynamics of the particular vessel trying to ease itself to the seared pave of the field.

At the Newark port there were monstrous machines that would shudder into action as soon as his flares were detected —computators which would grind out the formulae of his descent, using a strange, powerful mathematics all their own. No human mind could do that unaided, nor could Camp's ship accommodate even the immense charts that were the summarized and tabulated knowledge of the computators and the men who operated them.

Camp dragged himself along a line over to the small, unshuttered port and swiped a patch of frost from its centre, using a patch of waste for the job; even at that his hand was chilled and numbed by the frightful cold of the thick glass. He stared through the port at the meager slice of Earth that he could see, old, half-forgotten memories crowding his brain, and his muscles tensed at the thought of seeing people once more. The first thing he would do, he decided, would be to head for Manhattan and walk up and down Broadway as long as he could.

No more loneliness. No more talking to oneself or to a brainless lizard. . .

Camp had started, not alone, but with two companions. One had died on the trip out to Venus three years ago, lost in space—that had been Manden—and the other, Gellert, had disappeared from their stockaded camp on the cloudy planet; for two years Camp had been alone, doing the jobs of three men and doing them remarkably well. It had been difficult, of course, but . . .

. . . it was not supposed to be a joy-ride. And things were just as tough, in a relative way, on Terra. The cycle of murderous wars just completed had left great, leprous areas of poisoned land scabbing the Earth's surface. Oil pools were empty and coal beds depleted; clean, fertile ground was at a minimum. A new source of supply had to be found.

Camp was not the first of the interplanetary travellers; in the late 'sixties Soviet Russia had been seized by a passion for exploration of the other worlds. Most of their huge ships had failed in one way or another, with appalling loss of life, but one had managed to reach the Moon. The period that followed the next successful flights was one of feverish Lunar exploration and even madder scrambling for concessions when it was found that the Moon was rich in the materials needed on Earth. As might have been foreseen, this soon produced another war.

The conflict was of short duration, and men once more looked to the stars. A new, more powerful propellant had been developed during the war, and using this fuel, an expedition managed to reach the cloud-wrapped surface of Venus. A second expedition soon followed, and a third, of which Camp was a member.

THE results of Camp's investigations had exceeded his wildest hopes. Venus, while too young a world to have much (if any) coal or oil, was still rich in minerals and cellulose organisms; the industrial processes of Terra could easily be adapted to employ cellulose fuels. The ground was swampy, for the most part, and contained a high percentage of a sort of peat. That constituted the principal source of danger to potential colonists; a fire in a Venusian peat-bog would kindle a blaze that might sweep hundreds of square miles.

Then too, there wasn't a drop of drinkable water to be had on the planet. But with distilling apparatus, and fuel to be had for the mere digging of it, what problem was that?

Camp muttered in annoyance as he blotted the page he was working on, and he crumpled the sheet and tossed it into a corner. The slight motion lifted him from his seat and sent him drifting across the cluttered cabin. He cursed absently at the inconveniences of weightlessness,

and hauled himself back to his former position. He looked up suddenly. There was something wrong!

"Oh, my God!" he gasped. His continued lack of weight meant that the sphere was still falling free, that for some reason Newark had not taken over control. He yanked the shell from the robot and peered intently at its intricacies; it was not in operation. Hastily he checked the device for faulty connections in any of its delicate grids, and turned away unsatisfied. As far as he could tell the receiver was in perfect condition.

Fifty thousand kilometers to fall. . .

Then the observatories had not seen his signals, rockets that exploded with a ground-shaking detonation. . . But why not? Had another war begun in his absence, to make mysterious explosions a matter of slight notice? If he only had a radio. . . Newark! *Newark!* Why don't you take over, Newark?

One thousand. . .

Should he unlock the manuals? Was he adept enough to jockey the huge space-sphere to a safe landing? Perhaps he would gun the motors too much, to find himself a scant hundred meters from the surface with his tanks drained to the dregs. Or he might keep his jets open too long, and send a destructive backwash into his motors.

Newark! Where are you, Newark?

Nine hundred kilometers . . . a thin whistle keened through the ship as it plunged through the first fringes of atmosphere.

HE UNLOCKED the manuals and touched a switch. The grating beneath his feet quivered in sympathy with the awakened motors, and weight suddenly returned to him as the sphere's shrieking descent was checked by the powerful jets. He could see, from his place at the C-panel, almost all of North America, rapidly increasing in size as he watched. He shot a swift glance through another port. The sky was still black, but already more than half of the stars whose shifting configurations he had come to know were gone, their feeble emissions filtered out by the thin blanket of air which had been interposed.

He cut the jets, and again the ship fell free; this was by far the cheapest means of descent, in terms of fuel. He fired a short burst from a secondary jet to clear a slowly drifting lake of cirrus clouds far below, and the Great Lakes suddenly appeared beneath him. He closed a firing switch in sudden panic at the thought of making a submarine landing. The space-sphere had been designed to float, if necessary, but he had packed the buoyancy tanks with specimens and samples, depending on the Newark beam to land him safely.

The explosions of the steering-jet veered the sphere northward, well over the Canadian border, and the ship dropped again.

One hundred kilometers. . .

Like a dancer he tip-toed the vessel up and down, balancing it nicely and precisely on a blast, with a minimum of fuel expenditure, but dropping, always dropping to the surface.

He snatched a hasty look at his altimeter. Only a couple of kilometers now, he thought, and prayed that the exactly-measured fuel would last out this moment of terrible need. He cut the jets again, knocked the legs from under the sphere, and fell in a last wild plunge.

He strained his eyes, staring intently at the altimeter—at the little spot of light creeping steadily toward a red line on the dial. They met! And Camp, his fingers quivering on a half score of firing-keys, kicked over a foot lever that opened the jets to their fullest capacity, and pressed the keys. The rockets flamed with their utmost, ravening power, and the smooth rush of the sphere jolted to a shuddering

halt as it danced uncertainly at the tip of the column of hell-fire.

He had stopped flat about one hundred metres from the ground, he observed. Swifter, then, than was compatible with absolute safety, he reduced the power of the blast, bit by tiny bit, and the sphere settled rapidly into the incandescent pit its fiery breath had dug. The jets coughed, picked up again . . . and ceased altogether . . . and the sphere settled easily into the impalpable ash of the pit.

CHAPTER TWO

Village of Silence

"SON of a . . . !" Camp whispered, and in any other circumstances it would have been a curse. He lit a cigarette, watching the blue-grey smoke twist in slow, fantastic whorls across the cramped cabin, and wondered what he should do now. He absently released the lock that controlled the loading-port of the sphere, and watched idly as a small motor drove the heavy panel open to the air. A beam of sunlight, the first in three years, cut across the cabin, causing Marvin to chuckle with alarm. Camp tossed a black cloth over the reptile's cage. Marvin would keep, he thought, until it was discovered just what sunlight would do to the pallid little creature.

He finished his cigarette and flipped the butt through the open port. Years on another gravity and weeks in space had not spoiled his aim, he thought happily. Some things a man kept forever, once he'd acquired them.

Camp began to tap his foot impatiently. Then he began to count. Before he realized it ten minutes had passed, and still there were no high-pitched voices babbling outside, no white, excited faces peering through the port, no visitors to his crater to welcome him as befitting a returned hero.

Almost angrily he strode to the lip of the port's shelving door and vaulted to the top of the parapet of charred, powdered earth his landing had flung up. He had come down, he saw, near the shore of a fairly large body of water, a lake somewhere near Lake Superior, from what he'd been able to see during the descent. To his right was the water; to his left a concrete highway, and, a kilometre or two along the road, he saw the slick ferroconcrete structures of a town. But over all the country in his sight, there was not a single person to be seen, nor any sign of life.

He took a few steps toward the highway, stopped uncertainly, and returned to the space-sphere. He rummaged out a pack of cigarettes and matches, and stood for a moment balancing a heavy automatic in his palm. With a laugh at his own adolescent ideas he tossed the pistol back to its place and climbed once more from the crater. Something wriggled in his pocket.

"What the devil?" Camp asked of the empty air, and fished an eel-like Marvin from his white coverall.

"Women!" gloated Marvin, leering at Camp in idiot affection. "Lead me to 'em!"

Camp strode across the grass to the white streak of the highway. "You be good," he commanded, stuffing the lizard back into his pocket, "or I'll send you to bed without any sugar. We're going to call on the deacon."

The walk was dismal and seemingly interminable keeping to the left of the concrete pavement, expecting any moment to be hailed by the klaxon of a five-decker bus roaring past, Camp plodded steadily toward the village, glad even for the slight company of Marvin.

"MY GOD, but it's creepy," Camp said confusedly. There were not, he suddenly realized, even birds or ani-


John Giunta

mals to be seen, not an insect buzzing stridently. The town seemed asleep in the warm September sunshine, as quiet as a peaceful Sunday morning; here and there a gay-striped, orange-and-black awning flapped listlessly in the gentle breeze, and autos were parked in thin lines along the curbs.

But the awnings were torn and flapped by the wind's tugging fingers, and the bleaching cars stood on flat tires, rusting away where they were parked.

Camp strode along the main street of the village, searching, hunting, looking through the windows of the little specialty shops and the larger general stores, some of them empty and gaping like blind eyes where old-fashioned glass had shattered or fallen out. The stores were unlocked, all of them, indicating that whatever had befallen the populace had occurred during the day-time, and though Camp opened several doors, yet some undefined fear kept him from entering any of the shops. Dust was thick on the floors, eddied into drifts and strange designs by vagrant winds, yet in the food stores meats and fruits seemed solid and sweet enough beneath their vacuum-exhausted glass housings.

He hurried to the other side of the street, looking nervously over his shoulder as he went, to a print shop whose sign read, "The Meshuggeh Junction Advertiser." He poked tentatively at the door. Like all the others he had tried, it swung open beneath his touch, and its hinges protested loudly in the thick silence.

An ancient Goss power press was the chief feature of the press-room, dwarfing a single monotype, and racks of fonts and job presses for smaller work. And in the rolls of the Goss was a stream of paper midway between blank and finished page. It seemed to Camp that the operator of the Goss had had barely time enough to shut off the power before he—went away.

Camp forced himself to bend over and read the date of the paper in the press. It was the issue of the "Advertiser" for *Monday, May 22, 1995* . . . and today, the stunned Camp thought, is Wednesday, the seventeenth of September, 1997!

He feverishly scanned what little of the paper was made up, finding no clue to the nightmare he was experiencing. He stepped from the shop, at last, and stood blinking for a moment in the bright afternoon sunshine.

Then he heard the silence . . . what silence! Silence deep and unbroken, unending, terrifying . . . silence blanketing a world! He whirled suddenly and shouted, flinching as the echo bounced eerily back from the nearby hills. He went on down the street, looking around at every step. He felt that if he could turn quickly enough, he would see somebody peering stealthily over a window-sill or around a door. His hurried pace turned into a run.

"You're crazy, Camp," Marvin jeered from his pocket.

Camp found himself at the village docks. There were boats moored there, the gay-bannered cruisers and motor-yachts of vacationers who had been there for the Spring fishing and camping when *it*—whatever unimaginable thing the single syllable implied—happened.

Only the larger and newer craft, those with the *duraloy* hulls so popular before Camp had left for another planet, were still afloat, and all of these, he soon discovered, needed repairs of one sort or another before they would run. He finally chose, after thorough inspection, a sturdy cabin cruiser. Its tanks were slopping-full of oil, but Camp wasn't quite sure how good this would be after its two-year ripening. He drained the tanks accordingly, and refilled them from sealed cans he had found.

He started the motors, grimacing as thick clouds of black smode vomited from the twin exhausts and a back-fire popped

sharply once or twice, indicating vital need of a tune-up.

He worked grimly and silently, the only sounds breaking the heavy quiet being the clicking of his tools and the strident buzz of a battery charger. Dimly apparent in the back of his mind was an awareness of inimically circling shadows, of a vague menace watching him as he worked, and he shivered uncontrollably.

At last it was too dark to continue the repairs. He straightened his aching back and tossed his wrench aside, wiping a gob of grease from his face with a bit of waste. He stepped into the darkness of the battery-room, a darkness relieved only by the spasmodic, cold, blue flickering spark of the charger. The door closed behind him.

CAMP pried one eye open a terrific trifle and yawned. Halfway through the yawn he sat bolt-upright, his heart pounding against his ribs like a frightened steam hammer, and stared about the small, bare room.

"Well?" a jeering voice demanded, and Camp jumped. Memory returned to him with a rush.

Unwilling, in his unfamiliarity, to leave the batteries charging all night, he had turned off the charger; finding this couch in an adjoining room, the gas station had seemed as good a place as any to bed down for the night. And the voice? Marvin, of course.

He had but to connect a starter-wire or so and clean up the resultant mess in the motor-well of the cruiser, and carry a few cases of canned food aboard. A map he had found indicated that this was Lake Nipigon, in Ontario. Nipigon, he knew, connected with Lake Superior; once in the Great Lake he could head for Isle Royale and the town of Johns. Why he decided on his old summer home he didn't know, but familiar surroundings would be better than the terrifying stillness of this deserted, unknown village. He carefully steered through the maze of moored and awash craft before him, and once out in the lake, set the course for the mouth of the Nipigon River and left it up to the automatic steering gear. . . .

The Nipigon River opened up into Lake Superior, and a large island—Isle Royale, by his map—loomed ahead, its bays offering comfortable harbor for his small craft. Camp paralleled its shore, searching for recognizable landmarks. At last he spotted the old, familiar buoy, and on the island, just over a clump of trees, the red roof of the hotel he had patronized in the old days. He put in to shore and tied up at the dock.

Quite suddenly Camp realized that he'd only a very sketchy breakfast and no lunch, and that he was hungry. He slung Marvin into a pocket again and said, "Come on, Marvin. We're off to see the wizard."

Marvin snuggled into a comfortable ball and sleepily corrected. "Lizard . . . *petrosaurus parlante veneris* . . ."

Camp soon found Broadway, the central avenue of the town, and wandered disconsolately past dusty alleys and snug little homes, all silent and dead. There was a cafeteria ahead, the only one the town boasted, and he listlessly entered, wondering vaguely if he should take one of the checks protruding from the dispenser.

He stepped behind the long counter, feeling singularly guilty, and saw plastic containers of milk stacked up by the score. He took one, broke the seal and drained it. It was warmish, of course, but pure, though the cream had formed a solid chunk at the top of the container; the sterile milk would not sour under any conditions or range of temperature once it had been imprisoned behind its translucent shell. A vacuum-trap container yielded a slice of cake, marbled with pink and green streaks, to his questing fingers.

He bit into it and found it sound and firm, but powder-dry in his mouth. He set the slice down unfinished and coughed.

Repressing his resurgent panic with a distinct effort he walked slowly from the grave-quiet cafeteria—it was *too* spooky, that place which should have resounded with the clatter of knife and fork and plate quiet with the stillness of a deserted tomb, too spooky even for a ghost—and headed down the street to the public library. He had thought to find some hint, some clue to the disappearance of every living thing, but the library's doors were locked, and he walked on.

Far down the street something flickered . . . and again. Camp stared stupidly, waiting for a recurrence of the flash of motion. "Red," he said vaguely. "Red fabric." Had it been a banner of some sort, writhing under the caress of the afternoon breeze? No, he thought not. He quickened his pace. The flash had seemed to come from the door of a bookshop . . .

Cautiously Camp trotted to the other side of Broadway. The windows of the shop were smudged and dirty; he strained his eyes to peer past the streaky glass into the dark interior.

"Must have imagined it," he mumbled.

And then the door of the shop opened, and a girl stepped out to the bright sidewalk.

CHAPTER THREE

Girl Alone

CAMP'S eyes bulged dangerously. He knew her!

"Lois—Lois Temple!" he exclaimed, and ran across the street.

He grabbed her shoulders, shouting incoherent, near-hysterical questions at her, almost unsettled by his joy and relief at finding another human being. But she stared blankly at him, and yet—no! There was such a concentration of intense life in her eyes that for a moment he felt almost as though he had received a physical blow. Her eyes, for all that, were uniquely vacuous, and yet they seemed as penetrative as a powerful fog-light. Her lips worked slightly, as though she were reading an extraordinarily difficult passage in some obscurely written book, and Camp felt, as he later phrased it, as though someone were stirring his brains with a stick. Then her taut, white face relaxed, and she murmured, "August Camp!"

"Yeah," he babbled. "I just got back from Venus; came down on the other side of the border, by Lake Nipigon. But there was nobody there. There's nobody at all! Lois, what's happened?"

"August Camp," she said once more, as though to reassure herself. "One morning, two years ago, I woke up and found that everybody was gone. I've been alone ever since."

"Isn't anybody left?"

She shook her head, sending amber-colored ringlets tumbling about her pale face. "I've tried to work the telephones and a transmitting set I found," she said, "and there is never any answer."

He stared at her, suddenly noticing that she was dripping wet. "What the devil happened to you?" he demanded, indicating her soaked clothing.

"Fell in the lake."

Camp was puzzled by her costume. It was somewhat the same as the gown she had worn when last he'd seen her—but there was a subtle difference. It had been at a party then, the party for the Expedition members, and her dress had been fashionably modest. The lines of her present frock were the same, he saw, but the *intent* was somehow different. The dress was backless, and moreover, dipped sharply in front, baring more of her neck and slim, shapely shoulders than was strictly proper for the afternoon. The skirt apparently reached her ankles, but as she

turned a trifle he saw that it was slit from hem to thigh.

"I landed in Canada," he repeated, "near Meshuggeh Junction. I was—scared—by the silence, and promoted myself a boat and buzzed over here to Johns. It's awfully odd that I should find the one person left on my first attempt."

The girl's attractive lips twitched in a smile.

"I don't understand it myself. Did you say that you came over by boat? There's not a single piece of machinery turning on the Earth today; all the generators have stopped. They've run out of fuel or broken down, or something."

Camp fished a flat case from the breast-pocket of his coverall and popped a cigarette between his thin, crooked lips. "Odd," he commented. "My boat started easily enough after a minor overhaul, considering that the oil was all of two years old. Wonder the stuff didn't thicken or gum up."

"Your boat's a Diesel?" she asked irrelevantly.

Camp cast a covert glance at her. Her eyes were wide and staring; she looked far from well. There was a strange note to her low voice, a note of—effort, he thought. That, her odd, lonely survival, her inexplicable, though quite agreeable clothing—he decided to ask her. . . .

"Lois . . . I want you to tell me whatever you can about this."

"Yes?" she said, with white, even teeth flashing in a smile that he had remembered through all his three years of voluntary exile.

"I want you to tell me how you happened to keep alive—or here, rather—though everyone else has vanished. Tell me that, and how you managed to survive the past two years." This, he thought with some satisfaction, was a fair test.

He watched her face closely as she began to answer. Then—again that sensation of physical force, that feeling of mind-muddling probing that he'd experienced a few minutes before . . . and the girl slumped to the ground like a devitalized zombie.

"Damn me for a stupid, thoughtless ass!" Camp swore, and felt her pulse. She was alive, and her heartbeat was strong and regular; it seemed an ordinary faint, but he didn't dare take any chance. There was the awful possibility that the only other human being on the Earth might die!

She had received a bad drenching when she had fallen into the lake, he thought; her skin was still wet. That, and the shock of their sudden encounter, must have taken heavy toll of her strength. He gathered her up in his strong arms—she was so like a little child!—and carried her to the boat.

As he set her down he thought vaguely that she must have lost weight. Her hair was a little longer, too, as he would have wished it to be. Altogether she was nearer to his ideal than she had been when last he saw her, and in no way had the certain privations of her solitude affected her beauty.

HE PLACED her gently in one of the small bunks, drawing the blankets up around her chin, and set canned broth heating on the incredibly tiny electric stove. He had noticed, during the trip over, that the generator seemed to be out of kilter, and he took this opportunity of repairing it.

It was getting rather dark now, and working partly by touch, partly by the illumination of a drop-light, he had jerry-rigged the cruiser's generator to operate satisfactorily. Fumbling a bit in the cramped space of the motor-well he reconnected the mechanism and started the motor. Tiny sparks inside the housing of the generator assured him that his work was serviceable, and he turned away satisfied.

He stiffened as he heard a little moan from Lois' bunk. She must be coming to, he thought. A full-grown scream yanked him bodily from the hatch, and he skidded madly into the cabin.

Lois was tossing feverishly in the narrow bunk, writhing in the nastiest convulsions Camp had ever seen. He grasped her wrist.

"There, there," he crooned soothingly, smoothing the damp hair back from her sweat-slicked face. Her eyes opened wide, and she stared agonizedly at him. Another raw scream ripped her throat, and she clawed wildly at Camp's restraining grip.

Insane or delirious, he thought. He muttered what he hoped to be calming words as he frantically rummaged through the lockers in search of a medicine kit, intending to give her a sedative. Looking back at her as her screams whispered away, he saw that her normally creamy skin was darkening.

"What the hell?" he whispered. His quick mind, accustomed to instantly analyzing the split-second phases of Venusian botany, tore the situation apart and reintegrated it satisfactorily. Her spasms had begun when he started the motors. Was it possible that the stale oil in the fuel tanks had suffered a deterioration causing it to emit poisonous fumes? With an exclamation he hurried to the controls and switched off both motors. Almost at once the girl's moans were stilled and her wild tossings ceased, with no more movement than an occasional twitch of relaxing muscles. Her tawny eyes closed, and her breathing again became regular and effortless.

If the motors were throwing off dangerous gases . . . Camp dragged a mattress and blankets from the other bunk and fixed a fairly comfortable bed on deck, on the windward side of the twin motors and out of range of any potential fumes.

Back in the cabin, he took Lois' wrist to check her pulse; she had fallen into a quiet, easy sleep. Pulse normal again, he thought, and thank God for that! But—her wrist was still wet! She'd had plenty of time to dry off since he had found her. Curiously he wiped away the film of moisture from her skin, and felt it again. Cold, rather, and not a little slimy. No—not slimy, he decided, but slippery . . . like a seal's smooth hide.

With a baffled shake of his blond head he picked the girl up and easily carried her up the short ladder to the deck. Gently he deposited her on the mattress and returned to his work.

The starter switch stared at him like a cold, unwinking, metallic eye. He petulantly stabbed the button. The motors purred again.

AND again the air was torn by that shrill scream! One desperate leap pulled Camp over the hatch coaming to the deck. For a split-second too long he stared at an empty mattress—and out of the corner of his eye saw something slither over the side of the boat. He dashed to the rail and stared through gathering darkness into the water; there was nothing to be seen but a widening series of ripples. . . .

The black night pressed closer upon him, and a chill wind soughed through the trees on the shore. But it was quiet—so very quiet! Then Marvin's raucous tones sounded, somewhere aboard the cruiser, pushing the heavy, menacing stillness aside and shaking Camp from his shocked immobility.

Something had reached aboard the cruiser—slipped aboard at a point not three metres from an alert, quick-nerved man whose existence had previously depended on his ability to scent danger . . . *something* was out there now, chuckling inhumanly as it lugged the girl off to whatever doom had overtaken the rest of the Earth's teeming millions. . . .

He was sure that he had seen a bit of the bright red skirt that the girl had worn, and a slim arm crooked over the side of the boat . . . but something, he felt, was wrong, and he wished devoutly for the automatic he had left back at the space-sphere.

Had the thing really abducted Lois? Somehow he doubted that the girl had been seized against her will. So close together had been her body and the thing's blurred form, he thought that they might have been fervidly embracing each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

Twin Trouble

CAMP stirred restlessly and awoke from a night filled with uneasy dreams. No solution of the preceding day's insane events had occurred to him while he slept, or if one had, he failed to recall it. Philosophically he turned on the stove and prepared for breakfast. He decided, after running an exploratory hand over his chin, to skip that day's shaving, and began to tumble through the cruiser's supplies, bringing to light a sealed tin of bacon. He opened it with the aid of a screwdriver, being unable to locate a can-opener, and carefully inhaled the aroma of the meat. He hadn't come several million kilometers to die of simple food poisoning.

A frying-pan was placed on the stove, and the bacon arranged in careful rows on the hot surface. He smiled almost happily as the cabin became filled with the crisp breakfast smell, and set coffee to boil. He had found that given a good morning meal, a man could tackle almost anything with a fair hope of success.

His breakfast was set out soon, and he hungrily munched the crisp strips of bacon. Through a cabin port he could see Isle Royale and the town of Johns in the distance. He had cruised about a kilometre or so out before turning in, searching for any sign of whatever had taken Lois, recklessly exposing himself in the hope of drawing the thing from concealment. The past evening seemed like an unpleasant dream, until—

A shadow darkened his plate, and he looked up.

"You," he stated coldly, "are about the most irregular creature I've ever met."

"Nuts!" Marvin lipped, and scuttled to the protection of the leg of his master's coverall.

Lois smiled brightly, and sat down opposite the staring Camp. "Most men are irritable before breakfast," she said. "Finish your bacon, and maybe then you'll be in a better mood."

Camp obediently speared a chunk of bacon, looked distastefully at it, and put it down again.

"How did you get here?" he demanded. "And what the hell, if you'll pardon my language, happened to you last night?"

She gestured vaguely.

"Something grabbed me," she said. "Something fishy grabbed me when I was only half conscious, and dragged me overboard."

"'Something fishy' is right!" Camp snorted. "For God's sake, what did the thing look like?"

"I couldn't describe it," Lois said, and shuddered. "It had arms, and it weaved through the water—"

"Where'd it take you?"

"On shore at Isle Royale, to a cove near Johns. When I came to I saw it watching me, and I ran for the lake and jumped in. It didn't follow me—no, I don't know why—and I swam back to the boat and climbed on . . . and here I am. Does that make sense, or bring the story up to date?"

"Um," Camp said thoughtfully. "I guess so." He scratched his stubbled chin, wishing he had shaved after all. He looked again at his plate of bacon and tinned

bread. "Here," he said, climbing to his feet, "I'll fix up some of this for you."

"No," said the girl. "I don't want any."

Camp frowned. What was wrong with her? He knew that she hadn't eaten for hours—a whole day, at least.

"NONSENSE," he said firmly. "You've got to eat something." He tossed some more bacon into the pan and turned the current high. In a moment or so the food was ready and sizzling. He slipped the strips into a plate and set it down before the girl.

"There," he said. "Stow that away and maybe we'll get the sparkle back in your eyes. Very nice eyes, too."

The girl looked wanly at the plate of food. "I really don't want any," she said faintly. "I'm afraid you won't be able to spare it."

Camp glowered at her. "With the supplies of a whole world to be looted? Of course I'll be able to spare it," he persisted. "And anyway, it's cooked already. On moral grounds alone you should eat it; the stuff'll be wasted otherwise. I don't think I could comfortably manage more bacon myself."

Lois smiled weakly, and stared blankly at the loaded plate. As though she were forcing herself to an unpleasant task she picked a bit of bacon and swallowed it.

"No," she said suddenly. "I don't want to—" and broke off. Her face was set in definite lines of disgust; the food seemed to have made her slightly ill.

The baffled Camp removed the plate. "Okay," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry if there's anything wrong. Don't you like bacon?"

"No," she replied, with evident relief. "Not bacon."

"Then how about a string of sausages? Rich and racy, ground from happy hogs," he suggested with ill-advised humor. Lois retched daintily.

"Not sausages," the girl answered, somewhat unevenly. "The thought of it makes me ill. I would like a drink of water, though." Camp poured a glass for her, and watched silently as she swallowed it in one quick draught. "That was good," she smiled. "That took the edge off my appetite."

Camp blinked. "Oh?" he said. "But you can't live on water!"

Lois arched one thin eyebrow. "No? I can try."

And again something seemed to click in place inside the man's mind. The preposterous contradictions of the whole damned, fantastic set-up seemed to point to some huge, shadowy, indistinct conclusion far off in the distance—and, he thought, he feared for his sanity.

"Lois," he said firmly, "sit down." She obeyed, and he assumed a commanding posture above her. "Now," Camp went on, "what precisely is wrong with me or the world—or perhaps just you? I still don't know how you, of all the living things on Earth, survived whatever happened; I still don't know what it was that did happen; I don't know a single thing about your disappearance last night . . . and I don't think you'd tell me the truth anyway."

"But—" she began.

"None of that!" he snapped, and slammed his hand down hard on the tabletop. Marvin squeaked shrilly and scurried into Camp's pocket.

"If I've guessed right," Camp intoned, "you've got some ungodly peculiar friends!"

THERE was a faint scratching noise behind him. Camp whirled, his hard fists poised and ready for anything.

Ready for anything but what he saw. For it was Lois there in the cabin's doorway.

He shot one quick, unbelieving glance at the girl sitting quietly in the chair behind him, and then looked at her exact

twin only two or three metres away. They were, he saw unbelievingly, alike in every detail.

The two girls stared at each other in obvious confusion. It was plainly apparent to Camp that something had gone wrong with the plans of one—or both.

"What the hell is this?" he growled helplessly.

There was no answer.

He strode to the cabin door and stood before it, blocking it with his broad shoulders. "Neither one of you two phonies gets out of here until I find out what's going on," he rasped. "You!" This to the second Lois. "Where'd you come from?"

"From—from Isle Royale," she faltered. "Something fishy grabbed me when I was only half—"

He stopped her with a choppy motion of one bronzed hand. "That's enough," he said curtly. He eyed the two girls angrily.

"I don't know what's going on, or what your game is," he said, "but I'm going to give you one chance to talk before I put the screws on. One chance . . . will you talk now, or shall I get tough?"

No answer, except an apprehensive stirring.

"Okay," he lipped. "I haven't forgotten what happened when I ran the generator last night. I'm going to turn it over now, and we'll see which one of you throws the first fit."

A quick glance assured him that the cabin's two ports were too small to allow the passage of even the girls' slim bodies. He stepped outside, and slammed the door and bolted it.

As soon as he had started the generator he raced back to the cabin. He knew that blue sparks must now be chasing themselves around the brushes of the generator, and he watched the girls carefully.

And then . . . *both* girls collapsed in horrible, writhing convulsions!

Camp stared in horrified fascination at their frenzied, whipping contortions. Every theory of his was shot, now; he was certain that neither girl was Lois. But if neither one was the girl he knew—*what were they?*

Their struggles were pitiable, but Camp could be diamond-hard when the necessity arose. Grimly unheeding of their screams he waited for the next development. The discoloration he had seen last night spread simultaneously over the skins of the two sufferers, a rash that seemed to extend itself into a silky, dark-hued coating.

"My God!" he cried thinly. The girls were — melting — losing their forms! Slumping into ovoid, tapering creatures that flopped about the floor, each whipping eight short tentacles in open discomfort. Suddenly, then, he knew. These creatures —it had been one of them which he had seen slip over the side of his boat last night, not *carrying* an unconscious girl but *halfway transformed from human to monster!*

CHAPTER FIVE

Restoration

"GAH!" Camp said feelingly. He tumbled backwards out of the suddenly cramped cabin and grabbed up the rifle. Marvin, in his pocket, protested sleepily at the sudden commotion.

A metallic click accompanied the introduction of a cartridge into the chamber of the rifle, and Camp felt better. He peered cautiously into the comparative darkness of the cabin.

A clear, curiously gentle voice seemed to sound in his brain.

"Earthman," it said. "Turn off your motors. We will not harm you."

Camp thought it over for a second, and switched off the motors, though not letting his hand stray too far from the starter button.

"Who said that?" he demanded, suspiciously eyeing the two limply relaxed creatures.

One of them *oozed* forward a trifle. "That's far enough!" Camp warned hastily.

"I did," came that clear voice again.

"Yeah?" Camp said. His hand hovered indecisively over the starter switch. "Start at the beginning of everything and tell me all about it." Cradling the rifle in the crook of his elbow he fished a cigarette from his pocket and applied the flame of a small briquet to its tip. . . .

"THE name of our race," the thing began, "would mean nothing to you. It is sufficient only to say that we have come from another dimensional plane coexistent with your Earth, bound in certain relationships with your world by natural laws.

"We have always been a quiet, peaceable people, previously ignorant of death, for the world from which we come does not know that terrible phenomenon. Our science had overcome that, had passed beyond the point in the histories of all worlds whereat the vibrations of the mind gain dominance over matter; by a very small expenditure of effort we can mould any mass to serve our needs."

Camp snorted blueish smoke. "Go on," he drawled amiably, settling the rifle into a more comfortable position. He felt an almost overwhelming desire to laugh. "Go on. I may as well tell you that you don't actually exist, that I'm only dreaming you, but go ahead anyway. What brought you to Earth, or shouldn't I ask that?"

The creature's soft, wistful eyes regarded him steadily. "From another world came an invading race that was absolutely alien to us," it continued. "They were a race of conquerors, and to us were as horrible as we must seem to you. They had weapons, and they conducted a swift, merciless war upon us. Most of my people were killed, since we could do no such thing as taking the lives of our foes, even to save our race from total extinction."

The other alien being wriggled forward. When it "spoke", Camp was astounded to detect a difference of timbre and expression in the tone of the telepathed words.

"So," the thing said, entering the rather one-sided conversation, "we left our world. The handful—literally—of us that were left was rotated into this plane and onto this planet, whose existence the experiments of our scientists had led us to suspect. But . . . our people could not live with yours. We are terrifically sensitive to certain types of electrical radiations, as you have seen, and the myriad power-operated machines which made things pleasant and comfortable for you would have meant our deaths."

"Um," remarked Camp, and slapped Marvin's sharp little teeth away from his thigh.

"I'm a lone cowhand," the small lizard announced, somewhat irrelevantly. Camp scowled.

"So?" he prompted. "What then?"

The thing hesitated, and looked at its companion.

Then, "There is a third plane parallel with our own and this one, but it is a bleak world of eternal gloom, lit only by terrifying sheets of radiation from random stars which dip over its surface. To both your race and mine it would normally be uninhabitable—in fact, *we* would be unable to survive there under any conditions—but it was thought that all the inhabitants of Earth, all living things, could be placed under suspended animation and rotated into this plane. They would come to no harm, and would know absolutely nothing of what had been done to them. In time we would awaken them and bring them back to their home; we know, you see, that in ten years or so, as you meas-

ure time, our enemies will have destroyed themselves."

CAMP nodded slowly. "I see," he said thoughtfully. "You had a hell of a nerve, though, to do what you did, but I suppose you had some justification. I suppose, too, that I'm crazy, but I believe you. I'm willing to call the war off and play on your side."

"Thank you," the creatures said together.

"And as a friend," went on one of them, "we ask you not to use any equipment that would generate sparks or short radio waves if you can possibly help it. You've seen what it does to us."

Camp stowed the rifle in a corner where it would be out of the way, but not too unhandy in case of need. These disturbing creatures, with their seal-and-octopus bodies and quiet mental voices, were spooky enough, and while they might be on the level, he thought, still it was best to take no chances.

"Okay," he agreed, however. "Mind if I ask a favor in return? I'd rather you assumed human forms whenever you can, around me. It's a trifle disconcerting to find such lofty ideals and intellects in such —er—unusual—bodies."

The two creatures blurred and expanded swiftly. Again they were twin Lois Temples.

"Ah — no," Camp said hurriedly. "Could one of you change to some other person? I hate to be such a bother, really, but. . . ."

One of the girls said, "Think of a person; we can imitate his form."

Camp searched his mind for friends, and smiled ruefully as he failed to correctly visualize a single person. When he looked up he gasped.

"Hugo!" he exclaimed. "Hugo Manden!"

"No," corrected the image. "His body idealized by you. I found this figure in the back of your mind, surrounded with much respect and sorrow. Who was Hugo Manden?"

"A rather close friend of mine," Camp explained. "He died in space, while we were bound for Venus." His thoughts rambled for a moment. There was something buzzing around in his brain. . . .

"Yeah," Camp said suddenly. "Look, I got an idea! Why don't you people go to Venus? I just got back from there, and I know it's approximately the same as Earth. Certainly it offered me no particular inconvenience, and should present none to you. Then you can return my people to their homes, and everybody will be happy."

Manden's figure nodded gravely. "Splendid," he said simply.

Camp's jubilant expression suddenly faded, and he looked comically woeful and downcast.

"Yeah," he said dully. "Yeah, but I've only got one space-sphere, and that won't hold more than three or four of you. There was another ship at Newark, but that was dismantled for repairs or something before I left. Certainly *I* can't build one . . . can't you people do something about it? You did say that you could—ah—mould any mass to suit your needs."

"Not to that extent," Manden revised hastily. "By using the full power of all our minds, we might have, at one time; but now there are too few of us left. So few, I think, that one space-sphere will be quite large enough to carry us all. There are only twenty-seven of my race alive."

Camp tossed his cigarette butt into the water and watched it hiss into black extinction.

"Sure," he protested, "but even twenty-seven's too many to put in the ship. How are you going to manage it?"

Manden smiled. "Simple," he told Camp. "We can put all but three or four in a state of suspended animation for the length of the voyage."

But Camp was yet unsatisfied. "That's fine," he said. "That part's okay, but I just thought of something else. What, precisely, will you do about fuel?"

"No," Lois told him. "The sphere can be moved by telekinesis—mind-power. Three of us can do it."

CAMP stood by a smooth-lined, waist-high machine, so-called by him though, as far as he could see, it had no moving parts whatsoever. At his side stood Manden, and shadowing the scene was the great, round bulk of the space-sphere.

"Not very big," commented Camp, indicating the odd machine. "How does the thing work?"

Manden stepped forward and inserted a fist-sized ball, its surface dotted with an intricate pattern of perforations, into a socket in the device.

"Its action is largely mental," he obligingly explained. "That small globe is a sort of matrix which has been impregnated with the proper thought patterns to set up the automatic operation."

"Stop right there," Camp said. "I can see that it'd be too deep for me to understand." He cast a sidelong glance at his companion. "I'm kind of going to miss you and your people. You've taught me a couple of tricks—besides that little knack of levitation—that wouldn't have been developed by our science for a heap of years."

Manden smiled slowly. "You, in return, have done a lot for us. You've given us a world where we can live in safety and perfect ease of mind. We would not have been happy here, Camp, knowing that we were mere usurpers."

"Yeah," Camp mumbled. "I guess you're right."

Manden, with Lois close behind him, hesitated a little. "Goodbye, Camp," they said simply, and as they hurried into the space-sphere Camp could see them slumping and blurring into their normal tentacled forms.

The great sphere stirred uneasily, rose swiftly toward the zenith in a long, graceful sweep. It was uncanny, Camp thought, to see that tons-heavy mass dance lightly skyward unaided by the ravening, fiendishly hot rocket blasts. He sat down to wait.

After a space of time, about five cigarettes later, he became aware of a growing tension in the air. The light breeze which had been playing with his hair as he sat there had died away, and the hot and oppressive atmosphere was unaturally still. He shuffled his feet uneasily.

The sky had darkened, and now bloated clouds, like the swollen bellies of poisoned alley-cats, scudded past in a frightened cavalcade. The wind, too, had picked up again, and wailed through the nearby trees like a mournful banshee.

Each individual hair on his body was standing erect, now, vitalized by the tension in the struggling, saturated atmosphere, and breathing was strangely difficult.

He threw himself flat on the quivering ground, and felt easier.

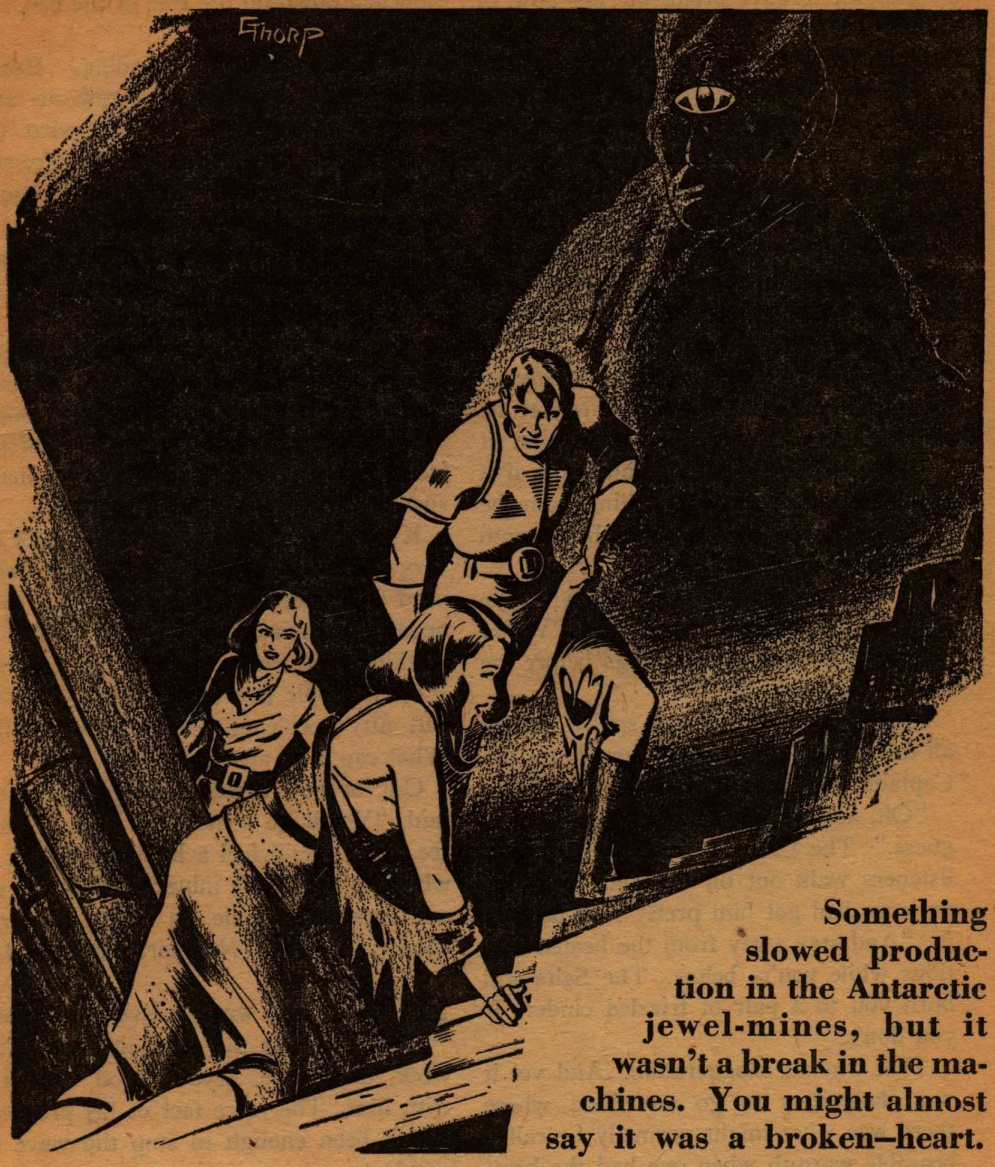
The machine that had been left was fairly blazing now, glowing angrily through its mantle of flame. Little whorls and specks of phosphorescence appeared, dancing like fireflies, danced and grew, solidifying as they grew. The explosion of the thunder expanded to the destruction of worlds, and the little specks of light increased in size.

"People!" Camp muttered thickly. And people they were, and all the living things of Earth with them, replaced to the millimetre in the spots from which they had been so summarily plucked by a refugee race.

Camp began to wonder how he would explain the loss of the space-sphere.

THE END

The Dweller in the Ice



Something slowed production in the Antarctic jewel-mines, but it wasn't a break in the machines. You might almost say it was a broken—heart.

By JAMES MacCREIGH

"MY DEAR woman, it's *always* snowing here. Well, maybe not really always, but it certainly seems that way. This weather may seem bad to you, but—well, I've been on this sort of work for thirty-five years. They didn't have any Salts to take the place of fur parkas and bonfires when I started. There were times then when a man who walked outside the ship's port, or who stepped out onto the ice for a second, could have got lost immediately, and frozen to death within the hour. And, even now. . . . WHUP!"

Captain Truxel broke off his flow of chatter voluntarily for almost the first time in four days, as he grabbed the helm of the speeding ship. With a quick flip he slammed the manual control over to starboard; the rudder motors whined angrily into action, twisting the ship's course to the right. For a second the vessel careened crazily to the left, until the tiny, odd-shaped screws of the vortex-keel also hit their speed and once more straightened the ship.

"Iceberg," Truxel explained briefly as he returned the ship more leisurely to its course. "No danger, of course, but it could have caused a lot of annoyance if it had stripped the speed-sheathing from the hull—or if we had climbed right up onto it. I've heard of ships that"

"I think we'd better get below," Kye Whalen interrupted impatiently. "We've got to pack up a lot of things before we land. Don't we, Beatta?"

"I'm afraid so," his wife smiled, taking all the sting out of their departure for the Captain. "When will we land, please?"

"Oh, about half an hour from now, I guess." The Captain didn't *like* to have listeners walk out on him, but long experience had got him pretty well used to it. "And stay away from the heated sections while you're below. The Salts will burn you to a pair of frizzled cinders if you don't."

That was an exaggeration. And yet it was dangerous to go anywhere where there was what might normally be called bearable warmth when one had the heat-producing Hormone Salts in the blood-stream. The germ-produced fevers were nothing compared to the inferno produced in the body of one who disobeyed that vital rule. Wonderfully valuable though the Salts were in such things as Antarctic exploration, their use was limited for that reason.

Kye was moody as they descended. As soon as they gained their cabin, he slouched down on the side of the bed, not looking at her.

With quick understanding, Beatta stepped to his side and threw an arm about his shoulder. "I know what the matter is, darling," she said. "You're still worrying about the transfer. Aren't you?"

Kye stiffened. "Why shouldn't I be?"

Beatta groaned mentally. They had been over this a hundred times. Kye was so maddeningly sensitive about his ability to provide for her. "Dear," she said. "After all, this isn't so bad. This wave of carelessness or whatever it is has to be stopped, if the drill-jewels are to come out of the ice. And they send *you* down to make sure of it!"

Kye glared at her. "Beatta, that's all very fine. But what gets me is, they don't need a mining engineer here at all; they need a psychiatrist. The machines are working fine, according to the reports. It's the people that are at fault. They've had fifty accidents here in one month! What can I do about that?"

Out of her woman's wisdom, Beatta said, "You'll do something, Kye. You'll see, dear, you'll feel a lot better about it when we get to the mine." She stood up and essayed a smile, to which Kye responded, weakly. "Now let's get packed!"

BEATTA was wrong. Even when they had been at the mine-site for a full week, and more, Kye's mood was still with him. The mere fact of his presence hadn't been enough to stop the wave of accidents.

The "mine" wasn't anything at all like any ordinary mine. Kye's company—International Milling Machines, Inc.—manufactured all sorts of machine-tool equipment, needed semi-precious and precious stones for drill-points. Intermill, as the company was called, had sponsored for publicity an astronomical observatory near one of their plants in the Andes.

The observatory had detected a brand-

new comet, a wanderer, approaching the Solar System in an orbit almost at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic; had followed the comet's tortuous course, spectro-analyzed it, and seen an unusual display of meteorites strike the Earth's Southern Hemisphere at about the time the main body of the comet was heading sharply in for the sun—with which it collided.

It took no great deductive ability to realize that the meteorites had been part of the comet's body, and to see further that they must contain a large amount of the carbon that the spectrograph had shown in the comet itself. So Intermill had sponsored an expedition, found some of the stones, and been delighted to find their utility as industrial gems. For the Earthdrawn meteorites were shot through with every manner of jewel!

Kye's routine, at first, had been simple. A top-notch mining engineer, he had checked over all the equipment; visited the mine-shafts; slid himself on a cable down the slick and unutterably frigid tubes in the ice made by the heat-borers. Everything was in perfect order.

He reported as much to Beatta.

"Of course there's nothing wrong with the diggings," she said. "You knew that before you came here."

"Well—yes, I knew it. In a way. But I have to make sure for myself. I'm going to tackle the generators next, and see if they're working all right. Five of the accidents were there, after all. Maybe"

Beatta stamped her foot. "Maybe nothing!" she cried. "You know there's nothing wrong with *any* of the machines here. It's the people! Remember what you said on the ship, Kye? —that they didn't need an engineer here, but a psychiatrist? Kye, I think that *you* are the one who needs a psychiatrist now!"

Kye stared at her woodenly. His lips shaped words, but were stopped before the words came out. He turned on his heel, walked out as though on stilts. "I'm going to look at the generator," floated back to Beatta as she gazed, startled, at his departing back.

Beatta sat erect. "Kye! *Kye!* Come back!"

But he was gone.

BEATTA sat on her hard chair for three hours and more, trying to think the thing out. What had happened to Kye? To every man she knew? A schoolboy could see that Kye was terribly wrong in looking for mechanical trouble to explain the slowing of production. No, it was a mood that had gripped the men at the camp.

And—her brow unconsciously wrinkled in perplexity—why was *she* unaffected? Except for the contagion from Kye, her spirits were normally high. So, it seemed, were the spirits of the half-dozen other women at the mine site

Suddenly the house-lights flickered and went out. The radio, which she had left playing away in another room, died also.

A fuse burnt out?

She whispered a mild oath, fumbled a flashlight out of a drawer, and sought the fuse-box. She put a new fuse in place and snapped down the contacts.

But the lights did not spring up.

Had something happened to the power-source?

If the generator had temporarily gone out of order, a very possible thesis, the batteries should have cut in immediately.

As if in answer to the unspoken thought, the lights came on again, noticeably dimmer than before. Beatta salvaged the fuse she had removed and thrown away, and went back into the bedroom.

Kye was there, sitting on the bed, gazing at the wall.

"What happened to the lights, dear?" asked Beatta.

"One of the bearing-mounts had a flaw.

It split, and the generator stopped. They'll fix it pretty soon."

There was something odd—odder, even, than had become usual—about Kye's listless speech. "Did Preston call up to tell you about it?"

No," said Kye, stirring restlessly. "I saw that it would happen when I was there. The flaw had opened up to the surface, and it was only a matter of time until it was bound to split right off. I should have taken it down then, I guess, but" His voice trailed off and he shut his eyes, stretching back across the bed. "It would have been such a lot of trouble. It doesn't matter, really, dear. They'll have it all fixed, sooner or later."

"Kye, I've got to talk to you. There's something—oh, I've said that a hundred times. But it's true. Kye, what makes you act like an irresponsible *baby?*"

A hunted look crept into Kye's eyes. "I don't know, Beatta," he said slowly.

"The way things are—it's just too much trouble to do anything. Oh, I knew what I should have done when I saw that flaw. Everyone there—Preston, and Argyle, and the rest—they all knew it was there too."

"Well then! Why didn't you—"

Kye raised a restraining hand. "I know. But Beatta, do you know how it feels to be utterly *alone?* Lost, away from every person you can talk to? Like Hale's 'Man Without a Country.' That's how I feel, Beatta; as though I were exiled and an outcast. As though I never would see my home again, or see you again, darling, —even when I'm right in the same room with you I feel that way. I can't explain it."

Beatta sat down beside him, her hands clasped in her lap, not wanting to disturb him by touching him sympathetically. His utter dejection made him unapproachable. "Why don't we women feel it, Kye?"

"I don't know." His eyes closed; he withdrew into himself.

Beatta sat regarding him for a while. She tried to get him to speak, but he would not be cajoled.

Then she got to her feet and walked out into the snow.

CHRISTINE ARBRUDSEN was at home. Nominally the Recreations Director of the little mining colony, her job had no duties at all now—for none of the men had left any interest in recreation. Christine was a friendly girl, and Beatta had liked her from the start. In the week they had known each other they had become the best of friends. Beatta spoke directly:

"Christine, you've got to help me. I'm going to try to find out something about this—this craziness that's got every man in the field. I think I know just about what to do and where to go; and I want you to come along. I may not be able to do everything alone."

Christine nodded in quick understanding. "I know," she said. "You want to investigate that borer, don't you? The one that turned aside?"

"How did you know?" gasped Beatta.

"I observe things too," Christine smiled. "I tried to talk some of the men into looking into the matter, but you know how they are. I was going to make the trip tomorrow, alone. But you're right —it's better that two of us should go."

Among the mishaps of the mine had been a minor one when a heat-borer had deflected itself from the normal, almost vertical course, melting through the ice on a long diagonal and coming perilously close to a "bubble"—a sort of inverted pit in the ice where submarine currents had hollowed out a cavern. Had it actually penetrated the bubble it would have been the last ever heard of that borer—but one of the men, making a routine checkup, had discovered the one that was out of its place, and stopped its power in time to rescue it.

AFTER Beatta had left him, Kye lay in a stupor for a while. Several hours passed; it grew "dark" outside as the sodium lamps were extinguished and the pale violet, fluorescent night-time lamps took their place. Naturally, there was no such thing as night or day in the Antarctic, where six months passed between the rising of the sun and its setting. An arbitrary period of eighteen hours, based on the needs of the body for rest with the use of the Salts, had been chosen for the "day"; the life of the colony was regulated accordingly.

Eventually Kye got up and prepared himself some food. Beatta was not home; without much interest he wondered what had become of her.

Having eaten, he went back immediately to bed. . . .

And when his phone buzzer sounded thrice, and the sodium lamps went on again to indicate morning, Beatta was not in the bed yet. She hadn't been home at all.

He ate again, hurriedly and without enjoyment. His increasing anxiety was cracking away the armored shell of apathy. Unable to contain himself, he got up in the middle of the meal and phoned all the places she might possibly be. She wasn't at the Prestons', he was assured; no, they hadn't seen her at the Dispensary, but thought she might have stayed with Christine Arbrudsen, who had been asking for her the day before.

There was no answer to Christine's phone, though.

He made call after call, till he had almost exhausted the score or so of other phones on the line. But when he called the generator plant, the phone suddenly went dead in the middle of the conversation. Simultaneously, the sodium lights, which had been growing dimmer, went out completely. The entire camp became black as the night sky above.

The fault in the generator hadn't been repaired, he realized, and the emergency batteries had been drained. The camp was powerless.

Suddenly it came to Kye, where Beatta was. The borer! She had wanted him to look into it; he'd refused, so she'd done it herself.

He hastened out, in the direction of the airplane hangar.

WHEN the two girls got to the runaway borer, they suddenly realized they'd no actual plans made. They held a hasty conference.

The upshot of the debate was that they'd send the borer down once more, as far as is would go before making the slant; then follow it down, hand-over-hand, on the cable.

They hooked up the borer to its cable; tuned it in on the radio power-beam. It slipped through the ice very rapidly. The hole was there already; all that the borer had to do was to eat away the tiny bit of ice that formed since it last went in; widen the tube where the rheological movement of the ice had, with all its titanic weight and force, crushed its walls together; and removed the snow that had drifted in. (The water formed by the passage of the borer through the ice was automatically pumped to the surface, where it immediately solidified.)

Beatta was watching the cable as it paid off the winch. When it reached the eight-hundred foot mark—the point where it had suddenly swerved off before—she cut off the power. She rose and looked at Christine.

"Well—how shall we work it?" she asked. "Draw lots, or both of us go down together?"

"Draw lots," Christine said immediately. She rummaged through her pockets. "Here," she said. "I've got a quarter and a dime in my hands. Pick one hand. If you get the quarter—you go down. The dime—I do."

Without hesitation, Beatta touched the right hand. The quarter!

"Help me put on the armor," she said, not a quaver in her voice. "And let's decide what I'm to do. As I see it, I'll slide down. When I reach the bottom I'll let you know. Then you turn on the power. I'll try to steer the borer straight at whatever seems to be drawing it. And I'll tell you whatever I see. Right?"

"I guess so," said Christine uncertainly. "Don't let anything happen to you, Beatta. Please!"

Slipping the band of the asbestos coolie-hat under her chin, Beatta lay flat on her stomach at the entrance to the tunnel; slowly eased herself forward, gripping the cable. Then she swung herself into the tube, and slipped rapidly out of sight.

Christine flipped on the phone speaker. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

There was no answer but labored breathing for a few moments, then a sudden soft thud.

"I made it all right, Christine," Beatta's voice said. "I'm standing on the borer now. I'm going to lean against the wall of the tunnel and try to kick the back of the borer around. I'm ready, Christine. Turn the power!"

With a determined motion, Christine spun a dial attached to the base of the winch. "Power is on!" she called.

There was a sound of muffled struggle from below. "I'm—moving it," Beatta's voice came through, between gasps. "It's a little bit hard. I—ugh!—I haven't got anything solid to—to push against. I keep slipping on the ice."

"Better save your breath," Christine interjected. "I can hear you moving around all right."

There was a long period of silence then, while Christine strained her ears for every sound. Then:

"I've got it going almost straight to one side," Beatta panted. "But I have to keep pushing it along, or else it tries to go straight down. It's a pretty tough job." Abruptly she was silent again, while slithering, rasping sounds came through the diaphragm.

"Beatta!" Christine said tautly. "Maybe you'd better come up. We'll get one of the men to help us, somehow. Maybe we can sink another shaft right over the place you're aiming for. But this is too hard, Beatta. Come up!"

She waited for an answer. There was none. She listened more intently, her brow deeply furrowed.

There were no more sounds of movement from below.

"Beatta! *Beatta!* Can you hear me? Please, Beatta, *answer* me!" Abruptly she ceased calling. That was worse than useless.

Indecision and stark fear for Beatta were in her face. Should she pull the borer up on the winch? Without having consciously decided on that course, she put her hand on the control,—

And saw that all the meters read at zero.

No power was flowing through the winch. The radio-beam, dependent on the emergency batteries, was dead; the batteries had given out.

There no longer was any doubt in Christine's face. She knew precisely what she had to do.

Just as had Beatta, she lay on her stomach and wriggled into the tunnel.

BEHIND the controls of the little scouting plane, Kye's face was grim. The borer he was looking for was two miles—say, three—from the camp. The plane's cruising speed was two hundred miles an hour. Three two-hundredths of an hour was fifty-four seconds.

And he had been flying for nearly twenty minutes.

The trouble was the utter impossibility of recognizing landmarks in the dim starlight, which was all he had to go by. The

plane went too fast to make ground objects more definite than shadows. He reversed the plane in a wide arc; sped back to the camp again, and started over. At the expiration of precisely forty seconds he stopped the propeller and switched on the heliscrews. Hanging on their vertical thrust, he was able to use the forward movement of the plane to whatever degree he desired.

And yet the borer was as evasive as ever.

Just as he was making up his mind to go back to the camp, leave the plane and look for it on foot,—he saw it, a gleam of metal just below him.

The whine of the vertical screws lowered in pitch as he cut their speed. Slowly the plane dropped; Kye saw a more or less level spot about a hundred yards from the jumble of metal that was his objective, and dropped the plane onto it. He cut the switch and scrambled out, racing to the machinery.

The borer wasn't on the surface, he saw with a sinking feeling. It was, in fact, very far down. Every last inch of cable attached to the winch had been paid out. That should be a thousand feet, he realized.

But where was Beatta? Had she been here?

There simply was no way of telling.

Holding to the cable for support, he peered into the ice-tunnel. The borer was out of sight,—of course. He had thought he might see a light from a handflash there below. But there was nothing.

Was it his imagination? Or was there a faint, thin fog of vapor rising from the tunnel?

The cable, he suddenly saw, was taut. It had been paid out as far as it would go, and there was dead weight swinging on the end of it.

The Bubble!

It was horribly clear to him now. Beatta, and possibly Christine with her, had followed the borer down. It had retraced its previous route—but this time gone all the way! It had broken through the last thin crust of ice and fallen into the deep Antarctic Ocean, wisps of fog from which were rising to the surface.

And Beatta? . . .

Kye flipped over the winch-control. Though it was dead now, if the power should come on while he was down there, he might have warning enough to grab the borer as it was drawn to the surface.

And even if he didn't—if Beatta were down there, Kye would find a way to bring her back to the surface. If not, if he found that she had been drowned, he himself would never return.

As had the two before him, he swung himself easily into the tunnel.

HIS feet kicking wildly against the slick icy walls of the tunnel, Kye swung himself painfully on down, down. He had long ago lost count of the distance he had descended; all he could know now was the recurrent agony in his torn hands; the stubborn weariness of his muscles. There was no way to stop and rest. If he relaxed his grip for even a second, he would fall. And he could not know how far such a drop might be.

Hand over hand, hand over hand. After what was long hours to Kye, there came a time when a separate effort of will for each muscle in his hands and arms was required to make them obey. Though he couldn't see, and his hands were too numb to feel, he could tell by the warm drops that trickled down his arm that his hands were fiercely cut and bleeding. Beatta and Christine had been equipped for the descent; they had had tough, thick gloves, and lights. Kye's gloves were paper-thin, and he had no light.

In the end, it was Kye's inability to see that caused him the most trouble. For his swinging toe caught in a little niche in the wall of ice: frantic for rest, he

wedged his foot into it and leaned back across the tunnel, bracing his back against the opposite wall. His tortured hands he pressed to his mouth; he began to feel the pain, now.

But Kye's body temperature was of the order of more than a hundred degrees. Ice could not long resist that; his foothold melted a little and he slipped; clutched for the cable—*and missed.*

The drop was not great; thirty feet at most. And what he struck seemed to give under him; he found himself *sliding* down the slanting tunnel the borer had made just before it was stopped the first time.

And then he plunged into water, frightfully cold even to him. He went down ten feet or more, came struggling to the surface.

Water. *Beatta was drowned!*

His despondency closed in on him again like a thick black shroud. There was no object in life; only the commands of his subconscious made him continue to flail the water.

And then the light returned to the world. He was swimming in *fresh* water. He tasted it again; it was—not salt, not the ocean.

His reason told him that Beatta could drown in fresh water as easily as salt, but he disregarded it. His theory was wrong; the borer hadn't broken through. Therefore all of his theory must be wrong, and Beatta still alive.

But where was the borer?

He fumbled for the cable. It wasn't there.

There was one inescapable conclusion, and it brought joy to his heart. They had made a side tunnel, somewhere up above. They were there now, waiting for him to rescue them.

He had to get to them.

Disregarding the pain of his hands, he pressed one of them against the side of the sloped tunnel, as far above him as he could reach. The ice melted a little, enough to give him a fingerhold. He drew himself up, stabbed the other hand against the ice a little higher, kicked his feet into the ice too. Over and over he repeated the agonizingly slow process, gaining a few inches each time, going as fast as he could to avoid melting the niches away under him and slipping all the way down.

A foot, ten feet, fifty feet he gained that way, when suddenly he felt the light swing of the cable strike his head, and simultaneously a strong draft of air blew on his back. He clutched the cable, swung himself around,—and saw, less than a hundred yards away, down a horizontal ice-tunnel, the faint gleam of a hand-lamp!

PROGRESS through that passage was child's-play, though he could not walk erect. Curiously, the light was not constant; it was as though someone were walking about in front of it. He shouted at the light: "Beatta! Christine! Beatta! I'm here!"

There was a cry from ahead; Beatta's voice. If Kye had been crawling rapidly before, that pace was slow compared to what he produced when he heard the cry.

"Kye! Oh, my darling—I was sure you'd come!" Welcomings were short. There was no real need for words.

Abruptly Kye realized that Beatta was alone. He said: "Isn't Christine Arbrudsen with you?"

Beatta was suddenly quiet, though she hugged Kye as fiercely as ever. "I think—I think Christine is dead, Kye," she whispered. "I'd forgotten—Kye, we must be quiet. There's something awful here. Look!" And she moved aside to let Kye see beyond the light.

At first he could see nothing. Then he realized that there was a vast cavern before them, hundreds of feet high and wide. And in it—

There was a shape that he couldn't quite define. He strained his eyes; it

seemed to be faintly phosphorescent. It looked like some sort of a statue, or an animal.

But it was alive! He saw it stir, saw what was now visibly the head of a living creature move, and a great, luminous eye blink open. Red it was, and brilliant as a cat's eye is brilliant. It stared at Kye, without passion, and he felt that overwhelming torpor creep back into his brain. And a horrid feeling of pain came with it; soul-killing pain that made him forget the physical hurt from his hands. Then, abruptly, the eye closed again.

"What is it?" gasped Kye.

Beatta shuddered. "I don't know, but Christine went down to investigate it—hours ago, Kye—and she hasn't come back. I'm afraid!"

THERE was a quick, jerking movement of the cable. With one accord, they scrambled to the ledge, looked down. Christine Arbrudsen was climbing the cable!

Kye reached down, helped her up into the tunnel. She appeared to have gone through a terrific ordeal. Her clothing was disarranged; her face was a mask of strained lines. There was hysteria in her voice as she spoke.

"Kye! Thank God you're here!" she gasped as soon as she saw him. She clung to him for support as they sat in the tunnel; there was no strength in her. She began to chuckle to herself, but without humor. In the light of the fading hand torch they could see tears streaming down her face even as she laughed.

"Christine! What's the matter?" whispered Beatta.

The girl threw back her head and screamed laughter. "The matter? Nothing! I'm alive again!" She abandoned herself to her hysteria, rocking back and forth in spasms of throat-tearing laughter. Kye grasped her shoulder roughly, shaking her; slapped her face.

"Christine," he said intensely. "Tell me what you mean!"

Abruptly she sobered. Her voice was quiet, with overtones of immense awe as she answered. "Kye, *I have been dead.* That monstrous, terrible, frightening thing out there—it killed me and brought me to life again!"

"Why? Christine, why?" Horror was in Beatta's whisper.

"I don't know! Because it's dying, and can't move, and it's in frightful agony. I diverted it for a while—that was all! Oh, Beatta, it's awful to be dead! You can see things and hear them, but you can't move or speak. I tried to answer you, Beatta, when you were calling me—but I couldn't! I was *dead!*" Her voice trailed off in a whimper.

Hysteria, only hysteria, Kye's rational mind was telling him over and over again. You can't die and then come to life again. The girl was hysterical. You can't die and

But Kye couldn't believe his rational mind, for his rational mind had no explanation for the creature out there in the cavern.

"What is that thing?" he asked. "How did it come here?"

The question seemed to restore Christine to normalcy. "It came from the comet. It lived there, Kye, and when the comet broke up in Earth's gravitational field, it was on a section that was drawn to the Earth. It is an incredible creature. It fell, Kye, fell all the way to the surface of the Earth. And it's still alive—though it is dying. It told me that. It read my mind, and it spoke to me. And it made me a promise, too. A promise—that it would kill itself! Because it's a highly rational creature, and it found in my mind that it was interfering with us. It's going to die soon, anyhow,—it just won't fight death off any more."

"That explains the apathy of the camp," said Kye slowly, trying to comprehend

an immense thing. "This vast mind, right by us, in horrible pain, dying. And worst of all—cut off from its home—because its home is eternally gone, part of the flaming gases of the sun!"

"But why didn't Christine or I get that feeling?" Beatta asked.

"I don't know," Kye said helplessly. "I can't understand any of this—I don't think any human being can, really. But I have an idea . . . which is probably wrong. But it might do till we find a better explanation. This—emotion that that creature has been spreading is a longing for the homeland. That's a basic feeling of every human being. But—women are not as subject to it as men. A woman is trained to cling to a man; a man, to support his country. And"

Kye never finished that speech. There was a sudden bright sweep of motion in the cavern, as though some shining thing had swooped, comet-like, up and away, through the walls of ice. In the same moment, the dull phosphorescence of the figure paled away; the huge red eye opened as the figure stirred in soundless agony, then dimmed to extinction.

It had kept its promise. Obviously it was dead.

But a few seconds later, before the three awed witnesses had dared to break the spell with words, there came a sudden new motion in the cable; a quick jerk, then a steady rise.

The power was on!

Silently, still gripped by the drama of the strange creature's death, the three forced their rebellious limbs to clutch the cable, and slowly were drawn to the surface, where was waiting a settlement, bright with returned power, and brighter with the lifting of the dismal cloud of despair.

THE END

TERROR TALES

SPINE-TINGLING TALES OF TERROR



If your heart can echo to the savage beat of native drums; if your spine can tingle at the sight of black bodies swaying in pagan dance—and if your soul can be filled with horror at the thought of two white people fighting against hopeless odds in the midst of the Haitian jungle—don't miss WHITE MOTHER OF SHADOWS, a thrilling novelette featured in the January issue. . . . Also you will want to read the other great stories and novelettes by Costa Carousso, Russell Gray, W. Wayne Robbins, Ray King and others, that make this one of the finest issues ever published!

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Stewart Sterling brings back Fire Marshal Ben Pedley; Wm. R. Cox gives us another John Wade novelette; Wyatt Blassingame, Edw. S. Williams, Don James and Dane Gregory all lend a hand in making the January issue a banner magazine!

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WE'RE limited in space this issue, due to the extra length of the stories. Much as we may regret it, there isn't much we can do about it, so we'll omit the preliminaries and go right into the—

News from Our Branches

Four new branches have been chartered, bringing the total up to sixteen. They are:

The Detroit Science Fictioneers, Branch No. Thirteen, Richard J. Kuhn, Secretary, 13598 Cheyenne, Detroit, Michigan. Principal immediate activity of the new group will be recruiting new members, to which end Member Kuhn would like all interested persons to get in touch with him.

The Uplands Musketeers Science-Fantasy Club, Branch No. Fourteen of *The Science Fictioneers,* K. Eugene Dixon, Secretary, Elkhorn, West Virginia. Meeting once a week, this group is now engaged in building up a club library of science fiction. Besides Elkhorn, science fiction fans in Crozer, Upland, and Powhatan, West Virginia, are asked to join.

The Long Island Science Fiction Association, Branch No. Fifteen of *The Science Fictioneers,* Edward P. Sumers, Chairman, 646 West Beech Street, Long Beach, L.I., N.Y. As the name implies, this club is interested in members from any point on Long Island who can attend meetings. Also they conduct a correspondence group for Long Islanders who cannot attend.

The Northern California Futurians, Branch No. Sixteen of *The Science Fictioneers,* J. J. Fortier, Secretary-Treasurer, 1836 39th Avenue, Oakland, California. This is also in the nature of a regional branch rather than a community group, but all members are required to attend meetings.

Notes on the Chicon

Over 125 people made their way to Chicago last Labor Day weekend to attend the Chicago Science Fiction Convention, 1940. While the number wasn't as great

as had been expected, the turnout of writers and leading fans was excellent. They came from all over the continent to attend, some riding the rods on freight trains, others surviving automobile turnovers and driving on to Chicago in wrecked cars. Colorado, California, Illinois, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts are just a few of the better-represented states at the Convention.

The three sessions of the Chicon were ably piloted by Bob Tucker, Erle Korshak, and Mark Reinsberg, the heads of the sponsoring organization, the *Illini Fantasy Fictioneers*. Pace-setting speeches were delivered by Ralph Milne Farley, Edward E. Smith, Ph. D., and Raymond A. Palmer, while dozens of others present took the opportunity to put in a few words. Among these latter were Forrest J Ackerman, Cyril Kornbluth, "Morojo," Don Wollheim, Art Widner, Milton A. Rothman, More Weisinger, Donn Brazier, David Wright O'Brien, Jack Miske, Jack Speer, "Doc" Lowndes, John Michel, "Pogo," Don Wilcox, Robert Moore Williams, Jerome Siegal, Ross Rocklynne, Dick Wilson, Jack Gillespie, Dave Kyle, Chet Cohen, Ted Dikty, Bob Madle, Elsie Balter, Charles R. Tanner, Helen Weinbaum, etc.

A motion picture, "Monsters of the Moon," was shown, being the only surviving remnants of a masterly puppet film made some years ago. Ackerman and Tucker received proper ovation for their work in salvaging it. In the evening, the masquerade was held, Dave Kyle as "Ming the Merciless," and Robert W. Lowndes as "The Bar Senestro" carrying off first and second prizes respectively, both in costumes made by Leslie Perri. E. E. Smith, who came as "Northwest Smith," equipped with a real, live ray-gun, was especially notable among the also-rans.

On the second day, the business of the *Illini Fantasy Fictioneers* was wound up, the floor cleared for motions and general discussion. After heated discussion, the Convention finally endorsed the bid of *Science Fictioneer* Advisor Olon F. Wiggins to hold the next Convention in Denver in 1941. A banquet that night in honor of Dr. Smith closed the conclave for 1940.

—Donald A. Wollheim

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEERS
APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

The Science Fictioneers
210 East 43rd Street
New York City.

Sirs:

I am a regular reader of science fiction and would like to join *the Science Fictioneers.* I enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for my membership card.

Name _____

Address _____

City & State _____

Occupation _____ When Born _____

Fan Magazines

ULTRA, published by Eric F. Russell, 274 Edgecliff Road, Woollahra, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia. Monthly; 10c. This nicely arranged little magazine is probably very valuable to the Australian fans, but its news, of course, is too elderly to interest the average American.

THE ALCHEMIST, published by Lew Martin, 1258 Race Street, Denver, Colorado. Quarterly; 10c. Neatly mimeographed in green and black ink, the latest issue of this magazine received is a vast improvement over the numbers before it. Nor is the literary merit of the magazine inferior to its appearance.

FUTURIA FANTASIA, published by Ray Bradbury, 3054½ West 12th Street,

Los Angeles, California. Occasional; 10c. One of the few fan mags to boast a photo-processed cover, this book makes the most of the opportunity by having the cover, as well as a large proportion of the inside illustrations, done by Hannes Bok, well-known and popular fantasy artist. And the reading matter comes up to the standard of the art.

With the Science Fictioneers

Members Reinsberg, Korshak, Tucker and Meyer deserve a great deal of praise for the superb manner in which they presented the Chicago World Science Fiction Convention. It was, without a doubt, the most interesting fan gathering yet presented. Now, however, we must look forward to the 1941 Convention, to be held in Denver. Olon F. Wiggins, Member Number 1 of *The Science Fictioneers,* along with Lew Martin and other Denver fans, are going to present the affair in July.

Jack Chapman Miske, 5000 Train Avenue, Cleveland, will soon present to fandom the first issue of his superbly printed magazine, *Bizarre,* featuring excellent material by the better authors. . . . Alexander M. Phillips, noted stf. author, was elected to the Presidency of the *Philadelphia Science Fiction Society* at the annual reorganization meeting. Members Madle and Ben Lesser attained the offices of Secretary and Treasurer, respectively. . . . Richard Frank (Milheim, Pa.) utilized the Chicago Convention as his honeymoon. Let's have a honeymoon at every science fiction convention!

Jack Agnew (Philadelphia) and your columnist recently visited several Baltimore fans, including Henry Andrew Ackermann and George Wetzel. An interesting telephone conversation ensued between the Philly fans and Fred Kummer, Director of the Baltimore Branch of the *Science Fictioneers.* Phil Bronson (Hastings, Minn.) edits a unique fan magazine. It is called *Scienti-Comics,* consisting of pictorial adventures. The continuity of the cartoon adventures is superior to the professional comic magazines.

Lew Martin (Denver) plays shortstop on a semi-pro baseball team. Earl Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.) is a licensed airplane pilot, while J. J. Fortier (Oakland, Calif.) is a midget auto driver. There are probably many unique hobbies or occupations pursued by science fiction fans. Don't keep them a secret! Send all items for inclusion in this column to 333 East Belgrade Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

—Robert A. Madle

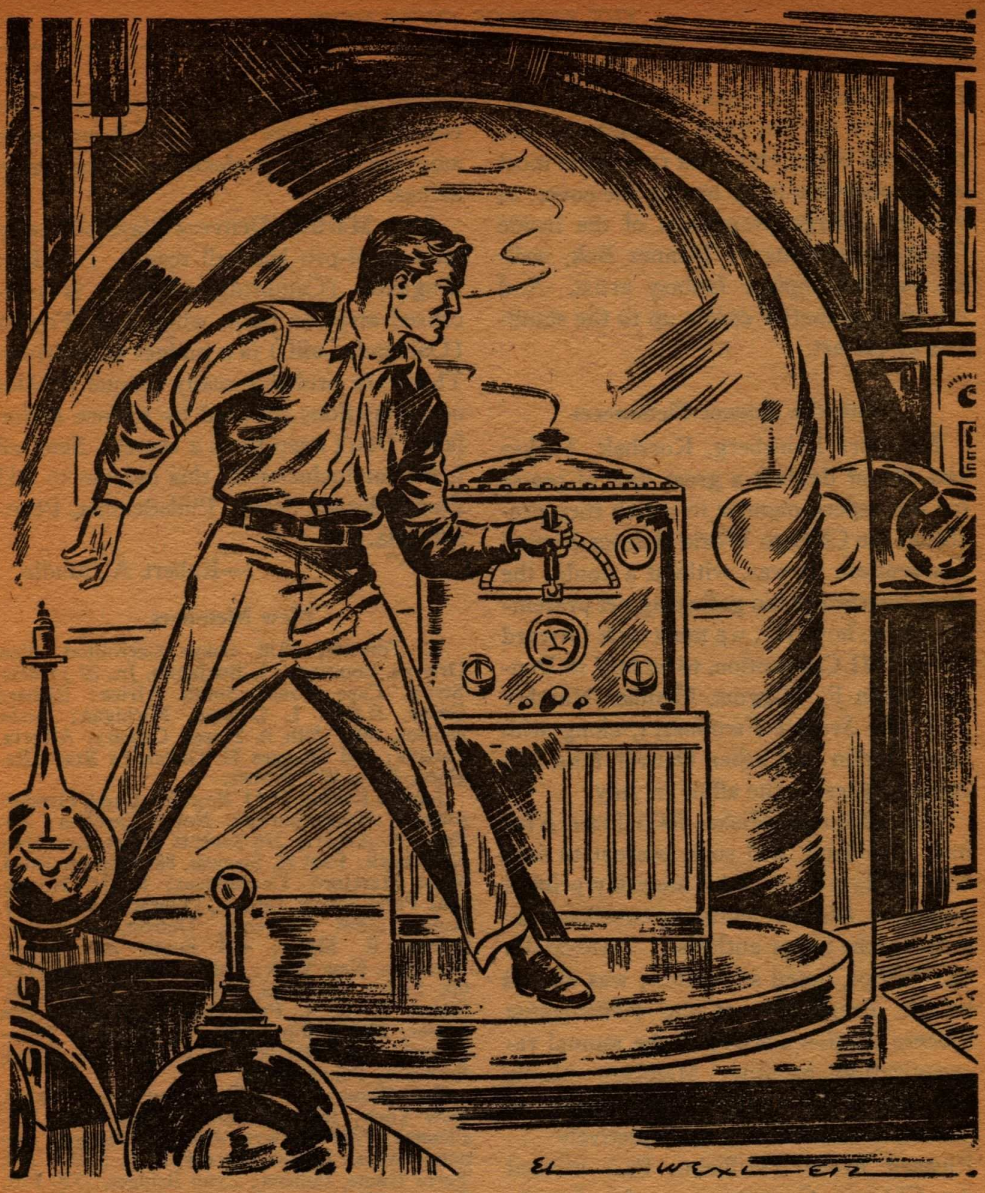
New Members

E. Torrible, 4338 South Carrollton, New Orleans, Louisiana; J. Benjamin, Jr., 27 Jordaan Street, Cape Town, South Africa; Richard Geney, R.F.D. 1, Owosso, Michigan; Leslie Neilson, 3002 26th A Street, Calgary, Alberta, Canada; and Georges H. Gallet, 13 Rue d'Enghien, Paris 10°, France.

Jerome Keeley, P. O. Box 250, Camp Hendersonville, Hendersonville, North Carolina; Anthony A. Aliperti, 276 Sackett Street, Brooklyn, New York; Paul H. Spencer, 88 Ardmore Road, West Hartford, Connecticut; R. H. Kindig, 3831 Perry Street, Denver, Colorado; Richard J. Kuhn, 13598 Cheyenne, Detroit, Michigan; George E. Merer, 404 South 2nd Street, Brooklyn, New York; Philip Bronson, 224 West 6th Street, Hastings, Minnesota; Kenneth R. Sippel, R. R. 4, Prophetstown, Illinois; Ben Lesser, 2001 Tulip Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and "Rajocz," 312 East Elm Street, Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Kate Glaser, 452 Williams Avenue, Brooklyn, New York; James McClement and Mary McClement, 7748 Berwyn Avenue, Chicago, Illinois; (Miss) Bonnie Warner, R. R. 5, Box 589, Terre Haute, Indiana; Lynn Bridges, 7730 Pitt, Detroit, Michigan; Mary Gae Gaetz, 31 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey; Bob Jennings, 909 East Maple Street, Westwood, New Jersey; William J. Schott, 5838 Ludlow Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Claude Held Jr., 494 Carlton Street, Buffalo, New York; and Gene Frank Autry, 3108 Gaston Avenue, Dallas, Texas.

Thomas Culler, P. O. Box 287, Sarasota, Florida; K. Eugene Dixon, Walter Lucas, and Mose Black, "The Upland Musketeers Science-Fantasy Club," Box 43, Elkhorn, West Virginia; Robert Degler, 217 South 6th Street, New Castle, Indiana; John A. Preve, Jr., East Side Drive, Concord, New Hampshire; Jerome Bernstein, 579 West Park Street, Long Beach, L. I., New York; Robert Plaut, Richard Plaut, and Joseph Plaut, 465 West Chester Street, Long Beach, L. I., New York.



BEINGS LIKE THESE

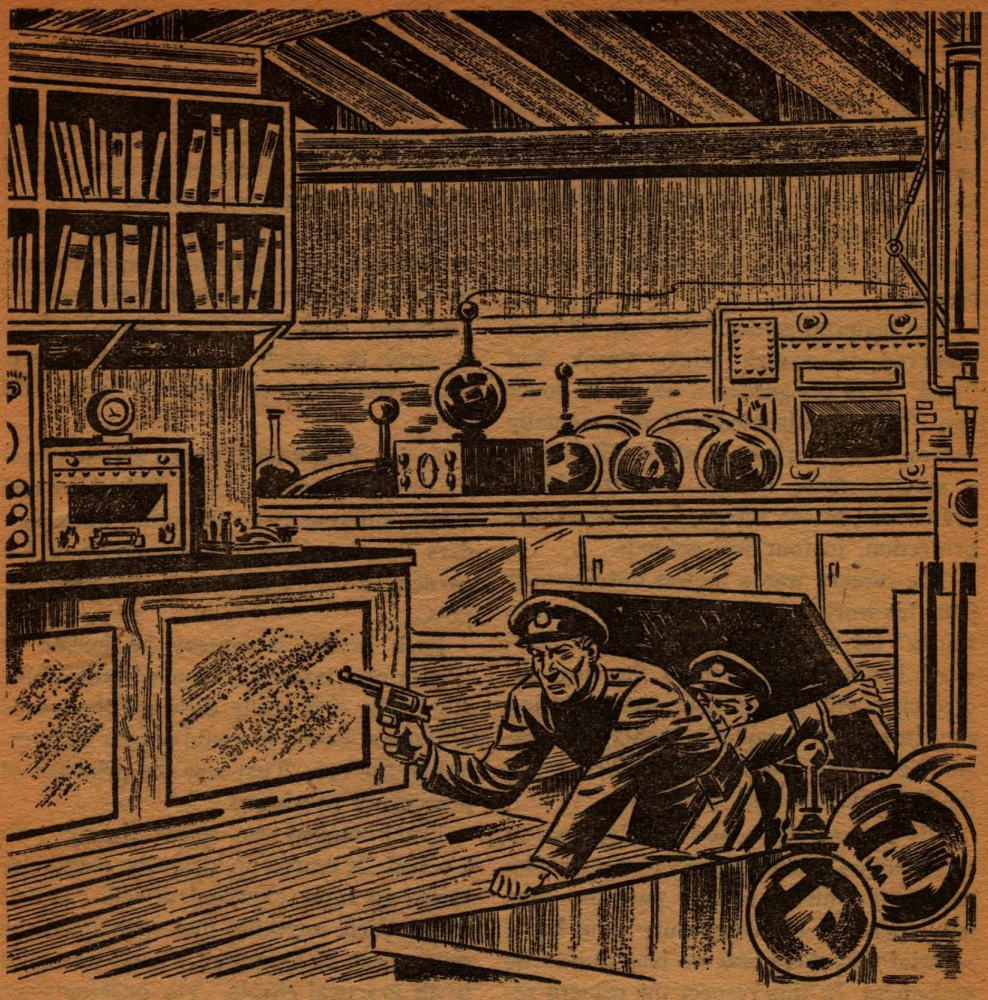
CHAPTER ONE

The Flickering Spider

FRANK LINKLATER rubbed his eyes, raised them again to the enlarged image of the spider being projected in slow motion on the screen in his laboratory. Was he seeing things?

That was just it—he wasn't seeing them! There should have been a large reddish-brown spider clinging to the rose bush on the screen, but it had suddenly vanished.

He looked again. Yes, the rose bush was there in sharp detail all the time, but



There was one amazing property possessed by all the peace-loving statesmen who had begun to raise the cry for war—photographed with an ultra-fast camera, they *flickered!*

By GRAPH WALDEYER

the spider was vanishing and reappearing with clock-work regularity at intervals of four seconds. First it was there, then it was gone. Four seconds later it was back in place on the leaf as though nothing had happened.

Frank refused to recognize that his hands were trembling. Brusquely, he snapped off the projector, removed the reel of microfilm.

"Something wrong with the exposure!"

Laboriously, he "read" the entire reel through a low power lens. It merely confirmed what the projected film had shown. Throughout the reel, 64 celluloid frames with the spider were followed by 64 frames without the spider, though the image of the rose bush was continuous.

Galileo, Archimedes, Newton, must have experienced the emotion that now

gripped Frank Linklater. In this first full-powered test of his newly perfected superfast motion picture camera, he had had revealed to him a new phenomenon in these rhythmic vanishings and reappearances of the spider image from the screen.

The material spider itself had not been observed to vanish when Frank had "shot" it in his garden a couple of hours ago. Those vanishments, if real, actually represented intervals of about 2500ths of a second, these minute intervals being drawn out on the screen, by slow motion projection, to four full seconds.

The camera was a logical development from his work, which was making "nature shorts" for motion pictures. What interested Frank was to record the tiny, incredibly swift action that occurs during tiny intervals—a bullet's impact, the machine-gun like stabs of the killer wasp, the lightning rush of the spider.

His camera was a new development in rapid action photography. The microfilm used was whirled rapidly past the open lens aperture, each exposure time being so brief that there was no blur due to its movement. In this respect the camera resembled the Stroboscope used in industry. But whereas that device depends for its illumination on brief intermittent flashes of brilliant light, narrowing its application to laboratory conditions, Frank's camera operated under conditions of normal extraneous lighting.

"Super Candid Camera" described his device perfectly. It could be concealed under wearing apparel, its reels extended flatly against the chest or abdomen, its lens peeking out a buttonhole or slit. A momentary pressure on a hidden lever —and the camera had taken thousands of pictures of some tiny interval of motion.

AND now he was observing such brief intervals in the life of this strange spider, intervals during which, apparently, the Arachnid alternately existed and did not exist! The spider—why, the darned thing *flickered!* Flickered at the rate of about 5000 times per second.

Tossing the reel into a drawer, Frank rushed out to his garden, dropped down beside the rose bush. Fortunately, spiders "stay put" once they have selected a likely shrub on which to weave their snare. The reddish-brown creature was still there.

So far, Frank hadn't been able to classify this particular spider. It had seemed subtly different from the other large spiders that inhabited the shrubbery of his garden in the suburbs of Washington, D. C.

Back in the laboratory he looked at it with new interest. It looked quite solid. Naturally, if it really flickered thousands of times a second it would appear continuous to the eye. That was the principle of persistence of vision.

Frank tapped the spider lightly with a pencil. It reared up viciously, mandibles raised to meet expected attack. It felt solid. Well, anything that reoccupied the same space 2500 times a second was solid to all practical effects. Try pushing your hand through the spokes of a whirling flywheel. . . .

Was there some new principle here? Did rapid photography catch nature off-guard, so to speak—show up unsuspected blank spaces in creation?

Did all living creatures flicker, or was the phenomenon peculiar to the locality, the house . . .

The house! But no, what could this manifestation by the spider have to do with the disappearance of the former occupant of the house, a Professor Rubert Gade? Or with his theory of multiple, co-existing universes which he had claimed could be entered by a proper device? Frank had paid little attention at the time, but now he recalled that the Professor's sudden vanishment a year ago

had occasioned a good deal of speculation in the District of Columbia newspapers.

Frank shrugged. Probably the old fellow had got amnesia, wandered off. What had concerned Frank was that the house was later advertised for sale at a great bargain. Most people do not like houses that have been the locale of murders, suicides—or unexplained disappearances. This meant nothing to Frank. What mattered to him was that Gade had left a well equipped laboratory!

He had also made the slight acquaintance of the kitchen and bedroom. Other parts of the house could wait until he could spare time from his experiments.

Nervously, he tapped a pencil against the desk, staring at the spider now safe in a specimen box, trying to make his mind accept what he had seen.

Abruptly he leaped to his feet, glanced out the window. The sun was setting.

"Can't shoot any more insect life today," he muttered. "Tomorrow I'll find what else flickers. In the meantime—" His stomach lunged up against his ribs and stuck there. "I can light up the laboratory, shoot myself with the camera!"

How would it feel to find that he "flickered," that he blinked on and off like a firefly's lantern? Cursing himself for a nervous old maid, he kicked a wastebasket out of his way, put his camera on the tripod, inserted a new reel of microfilm and set the automatic mechanism for a short burst of film. He posed before the camera, feeling absurdly self conscious.

He wasn't to conclude that experiment just then. A loud, authoritative knocking came from the front door. Hurriedly, with the instinctive suspicion of the inventor who has already been gypped once at least, Linklater swept his eyes over the laboratory, seeking a place to hide the camera. A moment later he leaped to the hallway in growing annoyance as the knocking threatened to break down the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Search and Seizure

THE door fairly burst in upon him as he unlocked it. Framed in the entrance were three grim, stocky figures in the grey uniform of the Government Secret Police. Frank got the distinct impression that they would have enjoyed bludgeoning their way in with clubs. They were strangely foreign looking, though it would have been difficult to indicate their nationality.

"Name?"

The question was shot out at Frank by the man in front.

"Linklater, why do you ask?"

"The inventor of the Rapid Action Camera, on which you have applied for patents?"

"Yes," Frank said eagerly, "the patent—it's been granted?"

The police agent ignored the question. "Linklater, I have a seizure warrant here. I am to confiscate your apparatus, together with all plans, drawings and accessories appertaining thereto—"

"Con—confiscate my camera? But why?"

"And you are hereby ordered to cease and desist from any further experimentation with rapid photography, either moving or still work. This ban is on pain of trial before a secret tribunal and possible execution for your subversive activity!"

Frank staggered back against the door, stunned. "But—but," he stammered, "you can't rob a man of his invention, can't violate his constitutional rights! This a free country, America, not Europe—"

"The Government, under the new official secrets act, is permitted wide latitude in such matters," snapped the agent. "Your fast photography process has become an official secret. Any citizen poaching on that field is now liable to the

penalties I have warned you against. Step aside. We have our duty to perform!"

The three police agents pushed roughly past Frank and walked down the hall and into his laboratory as though they were quite familiar with the plan of the house.

SEETHING inwardly, Frank followed the police into his laboratory. He should have known better, he reflected bitterly, than to entrust his invention to the Patent Office. Despite absorption in his work, he had realized vaguely that something was very wrong in the United States of America of late. A sinister change of attitude had come over politicians, statesmen, the courts, certain influential private citizens.

Whatever this influence, Victor Killgrain, youthful President of the United States, so far seemed untouched by it. He had this very week called Congress into special session to demand a showdown on these same abuses of official power that threatened the civil liberties of the population.

He did not intend that America should follow Europe. There the change had been swift. First, a period of personal liberty and democracy following the conclusion of the Second World War. Then —something had happened. As if by concert, the rulers became autocratic, domineering. In a few short months all Europe and Asia retrogressed into dictatorship and iron discipline exceeding that of the pre-war era.

These thoughts raced through Frank's mind as he watched the uniformed thugs ruthlessly throw his precious apparatus around as they searched for his camera. Frank's jaw thrust forward more and more. The President's jaw, friends had jibingly called it, because it had the same sharp, chiseled shape as that of Killgrain, the same dogged outthrust in anger or determination. Had Frank worn large, shell-rimmed eyeglasses, such as the President wore, his likeness would have attracted attention. Frank knew that, because he had tried it once, in a rash moment.

His slight, wiry form was tense as he watched the police. He would feel justified in resisting. He felt this entrance and search illegal. He would not give up the camera without a fight . . .

Abruptly, the leader of the trio wheeled on Frank. "This is all stock equipment," he barked angrily. "Where is the camera, containing the rapid action features? It is either the camera—or yourself!" The other two men came up, stood behind their leader, arms akimbo.

Angry blood mounting to his face, Frank managed a fair imitation of a shrug of hopeless resignation. He reached into his pants pocket, took out a bunch of keys. Disengaging one, he tossed it to the burly agent.

"It's in that safe," he muttered, pointing. He started to replace the other keys —and froze. A soft whirring sound came to his ears. He had accidentally pressed a lever, set off the camera concealed flatly against his chest!

The police were looking at him sharply. Did they hear it? They wheeled, dropped down beside the safe, unlocked it.

Frank expelled his breath slowly. They were not looking for a small, compact thing such as nestled against his chest. His first large, crude model was in that safe. It, with the drawings, might satisfy them for the nonce. He winced as his laboriously worked out plans followed the camera model into the sack.

The men rose, apparently satisfied.

"You will be kept under surveillance," snarled the leader. "Violation of the ban will bring immediate punitive action!" He jerked his head at his companions, and in a moment the door slammed on them.

Then Frank tore off his coat, rushed into the dark room with the film. He must

work fast, find out as much as possible before they discovered his deceit, returned. His thoughts were whirling. There was something a bit far-fetched about the whole thing—first, the peculiar phenomenon of the spider, then the visit of the police.

An hour later he was nervously putting the developed film into the projector. A circle of light appeared on the screen in the darkened laboratory.

FRANK'S own image was on the screen, posturing, looking self-conscious—even more so in slow motion. He held his breath. Would his image flicker?

He glued his eyes to the screen. Each second was a year. Two seconds, three, four, ten, thirty. His image persisted on the screen with gratifying permanence! His breath exploded in gratification. He'd never realized how good it felt to be permanent!

The film ended. He was about to remove it when on the screen flashed the unpleasant visages of the three police agents, glaring at him with a lifelikeness that momentarily startled him. He remembered—he had been facing them when his camera had accidentally started to operate—what was this? An exclamation burst from his lips. The agents had vanished from the screen. It now showed only the background of the laboratory. Now the three agents were on the screen again, still glaring at him.

Frank shook himself to attention, started to count the seconds. Four seconds—and they again blinked out in unison. Another four seconds found them back. Three more vanishments and reappearances, then the film had run out.

That was enough. Clearly, Frank now saw an inescapable conclusion: the police wanted his camera because it revealed something they dared not have known—revealed that they flickered! The Patent Office had sent them, and therefore it was involved. What sinister thing was happening within the United States Government?

Frank had a hunch he was working on borrowed time. The police had not been exhaustively thorough in their search. He felt that their measures had been for the purpose of curtailing his immediate investigations, that later, perhaps tomorrow or the next day, it would no longer matter! Something—he couldn't imagine what, was approaching a critical time.

Frank snapped his fingers in decision. Congress and the Senate were meeting in extraordinary joint session tonight, buzzing in anticipation of the President's address tomorrow. Anyone connected with the Government was fair foil for his camera!

He strapped it on, using unusual care to conceal it fully. Then he stuffed a briefcase with odds and ends—unfinished sketches, doodles, cross-word puzzles. Should he be accosted by the police, these suspicious contents should keep them diverted for some time—keep their attention from the camera about his chest.

He phoned for a taxi.

Three hours later he was back in the laboratory, weary, but flushed and eager. He had got his pictures, without hindrance. By moving around the vast auditorium he had managed to take brief group shots of most of those present, unobserved.

Time after time, as the developed microfilm played out its drama in slow motion, Frank emitted involuntary gasps. He was past surprise at the phenomenon of "flicker" itself; it was the numbers and the distinguished identity of the flickerers that kept his eyes fixed to the screen in almost unbearable suspense.

Nearly half of that vast assemblage exhibited flicker. There was Jay Gringer, powerful, autocratic Governor of New York; Haldane, influential leader in the Senate; Attorney General Latimer, actual

head of the growing army of Government Secret Police! All flickered.

And there was President Killgrain, present briefly as a spectator. Frank bit his lip. Would the President's image vanish from his screen like those others? One second, two, four, ten, thirty. Frank uttered a fervent thanks. The President's imagine was continuous.

Now the scene shifted to the figure of Secretary of State Cristofer, saying a few words before the assemblage. His almost motionless figure on the screen was constant. Frank was glad of that. The man whose job was to deal with the domineering dictatorships of Europe—but what was that? Frank leaped to his feet. Now the Secretary was vanishing and reappearing at four second intervals like those others.

Frank uttered an oath of pure amazement. Everyone else who showed the phenomenon had done so at the outset or not at all. The Secretary had been constant for many times the four second interval, representing 2500ths of a second in actuality. Then he had abruptly begun to flicker! Frank reversed the reel, studied the image before and after he had exhibited the flicker. Yes, there seemed a subtle indefinable difference in the two sets of images! Yet Frank had been there at the time, closely watching the man as he trained his hidden camera on him.

LONG into the night Frank ran and reran the reel, making a written list of prominent personages shown on it who flickered, and those who did not. Then he retired for much needed sleep.

The sun was high when he rose the next day. The events of the preceding night were clear in his mind. He must act! Somehow, he felt that the forthcoming speech of the President this evening must be a turning point, either for good or evil. He knew who flickered and who didn't. So what? What to do next?

The spider!

It was the one material clue on which he could experiment further in an attempt to break down the phenomenon of "flicker," its physical significance, its political meaning within the Government of the United States—perhaps the world.

He got the Arachnid from its specimen box, then took his microscope from its cabinet. From a drawer he took a scalpel and a bottle of anesthetic.

"Hate to cut this spider up," he muttered, "but it's the only way to get more information. The camera shows that it flickers, the microscope may show me *why* it flickers—it and the secret police and the politicians. . . ."

He attempted to anesthetize the creature. The chloroform had no effect on it.

Grimly, he took up a bottle of acid. "No time to be squeamish," he gritted. "If you won't nod I'll have to kill you. Let's see if a drop of acid will do it." He squeezed a drop of nitric acid on to the head of the spider. The acid seeped slowly through its body, formed a searing blob beneath it on the desk. The spider showed no effects of its passage.

"So!" Exasperated and puzzled, Frank took the scalpel. "I'll get a slice for the microscope if I have to chip it off with a cleaver," he threatened. He tried to cut into the spider's fat body, could make no impression. The thing seemed steel hard.

Frank threw down the scalpel, jumped up and walked around the desk, glaring at the spider as if it had just called him a name. He grabbed the instrument again, pressed it down more gently on the spider's body. Now it slowly sank in.

"Easy does it!" he exclaimed amazedly. He continued to press down the knife through the round body, clear to the table, completely severing it in two—or so he thought. But the halves refused to separate. He withdrew the knife, caught a glance of it, and his jaw dropped. There was a neat, round chunk out of the

knife, where it had passed within the radius of the spider's body. That part of the knife had simply dissipated. The spider was whole and unmutilated.

Frank dropped wordlessly into the chair, stared stupidly at the fat, reddish creature for a long interval. Suddenly he gave a loud gulp. The spider was no longer there. It had vanished from the desk before his eyes. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Another Plane

THE beings in the long, white laboratory were indubitably human, to judge from their forms. They could have passed without notice in any crowd along Broadway, or the Bronx. Could, that is, had they worn conventional clothing. Even with the garments they now wore, they could have passed at a Hallowe'en ball, and perhaps then the strange suggestion of the bizarre alienness that clung about them would have gone unnoticed. . .

A row of them were sitting at a long bench, intently watching screens before them. On those screens were various images, some closely resembling earth forms of life, others different from anything ever classified by earth scientists.

One of the beings was studying the image of a large, reddish-brown creature that closely resembled an earthly spider. Suddenly he called to one whose authoritative air marked him out from the rest.

"Zeno, something is happening to Control Specimen X42—it is being experimented upon in the earth plane!"

Zeno immediately came over, looked over the attendant's head at the image of the spider. As they watched, a blob of foreign matter passed downward through its body. Then a bright, sharp object was injected into it.

Zeno wheeled about, went to an instrument on the opposite wall. "Oxxo, Washington, D.C., earth plane," he barked. "Hello, Oxxo? The interplanoscope shows Control Specimen X42 is being experimented upon by a human. That's the Uclat we projected into Area 37. You know, of course, who inhabits the house in that Area? The earthian who moved in a couple of earth months ago, forcing us to stop traveling through the transitional machine. He it must be who is now attempting to dissect the Uclat! Great Roggerdung, perhaps he has already divined our life-principle. This must be stopped at once, Oxxo, we can not have our plans endangered at the last moment!"

An oath came from Oxxo. "We've already had trouble with him. He invented a rapid photography device, which we have confiscated, and—"

"Rapid photography!" exploded Zeno. "Great Dungerfogg—and you didn't incarcerate him, you idiot? He may already have discovered—"

"This country is still a democracy, Chief," broke in Oxxo tersely. "Our control isn't yet complete. It is a wonder we have got away with as much as we have without arousing dangerous suspicion and investigations of which this people is so fond. Illegal arrest and all that—"

"Get that earthian," yelled Zeno into the instrument. "Immediately, understand? After tonight there won't be such a thing as 'illegal arrest.' And watch things closely for the next ten or twelve hours!"

Zeno slammed up the instrument, walked over to the screen and pulled a switch. The spider—or Uclat—suddenly became three-dimensional on the screen and fell to the long bench.

FROM the way the police bashed in the front door without even knocking, Frank got the distinct impression that he was now a hunted man. He didn't wait to find out.

Leaping up from the desk from which the spider had vanished, he glanced quick-

ly about. Already they were running through the hall.

The dark room! It offered the only immediate hiding place. He leaped quickly into it, bolted the door, switched on the feeble red light.

Instinctively he looked overhead—which he had always been too busy to think of doing before. The vague outlines of a trap door into the attic were visible. Spryly, he leaped up to the sink, managed to displace the trap door from the rim, which he could just reach with his fingers. A banging outside the door gave him a burst of strength, and he tumbled into the attic.

He felt a bolt of the trapdoor, shot it. He rose, found a switch after an age of blind fumbling. A bright light sprang on.

Frank almost forgot his danger in his amazement. Before him was a curious apparatus. It consisted of a tall, circular glass cage, with an entrance big enough for a man. Surrounding the cage were generators, tubes, converters, amidst complicated masses of wiring.

Through the glass of the cylinder, Frank gaped at a large switch. It was in a groove under the word, "Return." Opposite was a groove with the word, "Go."

Had Gade, then, really vanished into another universe, via this strange apparatus? And if so, how come the switch was in the "Return" groove?

A crash sounded from below—something giving way as the police strove to reach the trap door. Frank came to a quick decision, crawled into the interior of the glass cylinder. He reached for the switch, drew his hand back in indecision. Would it be the police—or the Unknown?

In the stress of the moment, Gade's theory, as Frank had read it in the newspapers, began to flow back into his mind. There were many different universes, coexisting in two different ways: in slightly different positions of space; in slightly different intervals of time. Each universe was in effect a separate frame in space-time. Each universe occupied a given position in space for a fraction of an instant, then was succeeded by the following universe. Thus no universe ever quite caught up with the one preceding it in space-time. A substantially correct idea could be gotten by visualizing these co-existent universes as spokes in a rapidly revolving waterwheel.

Each spoke repeatedly occupied every possible position within the radius of the wheel.

Frank grasped the switch firmly, as a thudding at the trapdoor reached him through the glass. Gade had claimed these other space time frames could be entered. How? He racked his memory. Inertia—that was it! What would happen if a person were made inert—lost all the motions imparted to him by the movements of the earth, the sun, the star drifts in space? In what direction would he go?

He would remain stationary with relation to space, Gade had maintained, but time would still flow past him! The following universe in the space-time frame would catch up to him. Gade's machine was designed to make him inertialess for just the necessary fraction of an instant to allow this following universe to embrace him. Then he would be in that other universe, responsive to its laws. He would appear in an area in the other plane that corresponded with his attic in the earth plane.

Frank whirled at a sound. An arm holding a gun came through the trapdoor aperture, followed by a head and shoulder. Frank jerked the switch to the "Go" groove, releasing the forces that would kick each and every atom of his body into momentary inertia. . .

There was a blinding flash, combined with a terrific physical shock, as though he had been hurled through a stone wall. The transition was instantaneous. Half stunned, Frank looked around.

HE WAS still in the glass cylinder, but outside the scene was changed. He was on a raised dais, at one end of a long white laboratory. Seated at a bench along one wall were several strangely garbed beings. They were not watching the screens before them now. They were all straining their necks toward Frank, staring at him intently, menacingly. Their stares were distinctly unpleasant.

One of them advanced toward him with slow, catlike tread, eyes slitted suspiciously.

"Who—are—you?" The words, curiously accented, were in English. What to say? Frank did not want his words to condemn him.

He was relieved of a decision by one of those at the bench. "Don't you see, Zeno," this being chortled, "he is the human who occupies the house in Area 37, in which is the transitional machine. He must have used it in order to escape Oxxo's men."



"Escape?" Zeno's harsh voice was sardonic. "Ah, yes, Zumma—from the frying pan into the fire, to use an earthly phrase! He must be destroyed, as was the other earthman, Gade." He stepped up to the glass cylinder; "You may as well emerge," he rasped, "unless you prefer to return to the earth realm? Ah, I thought so, Oxxo's men await him there!"

Frank shrugged, crawled out of the glass inclosure, stepped down off the dais.

"Shall I destroy him, chief," Zumma, with drawn weapon, had followed Zeno.

"Wait. This is the earthman who has detected our presence upon the earth plane. He must have an exceptional intellect. It will amuse me to keep his mind functioning for a brief time. Look, earthman, do you recognize this?"

Zeno opened his hand, exposing something to view.

Frank drew back, surprised. It was the spider that had vanished from his desk less than a half hour ago.

Zeno smiled evilly. "Yes, he is also the one who experimented on the Uclat—the only earth man who has suspected." He thrust his face at Frank. "You come in time to see us take the last step in the domination of earth—the plan started by the entrance into our realm of the earthman Gade, whom we destroyed. Already our people appear upon the earth plane as the rulers of Europe and Asia. Tonight the last vestige of human rule will be swept from earth. Tonight, when we will project our substitute for the President of America!"

Frank's thoughts whirled. Certain definite ideas emerged from the chaos in his mind. These creatures were responsible for whatever was going on upon earth. The spider, Oxxo's men, the statesmen and politicians whose images showed flicker, were somehow of these creatures. The flicker his camera detected was their distinguishing characteristic. In some strange manner, probably through the Gade machine, they had invaded earth, gotten into ruling positions, without fear of detection—until he had invented his camera! And now he had stumbled into the hotbed of the creatures. He must get back to earth with his information, warn the President! But first he must learn the *modus operandi* of these beings. . .

Zeno rubbed his hands in sardonic glee, as he watched the play of expression on Frank's mobile features.

"You glance at the transition machine," he jeered. "You are correct. We made use of it, after destroying Gade, to enter the plane of earth. We continued to use it at will until two earth-months ago, when you occupied the building in which it was located. But by then we no longer needed it. Hundreds of our scientists had already been sent through. They entered the structure of your society undetected, in every country. Studied your language, sciences, social order and governmental systems. Since our perceptions are almost instantaneous, we mastered all these things in a few months. We then decided that we could rule earth without slow-witted humans knowing it until too late. Indeed, when we saw your vast numbers we were alarmed, and decided we must guard against them breaking through some day, overwhelming us. When our rule is complete, the world of humans will be plunged into war. Each Rogat ruler will try to get his human armies killed first. sort of give-away game! And when all humans are killed, we Rogats will inhabit two co-existing world-planes instead of one! And this plan will be put into full operation tonight—when we have projected our substitute for the President of the United States!"

COLD dread gripped Frank. Confusion seethed in his mind. These beings substituting for earthly rulers—how could that be? They had first entered the earth-plane only a year ago, and the earthly

rulers were all the same men who had been in power for several years. The important statesmen whose images flickered had also been in the public eye for years. Yet, the flicker was the mark of these creatures. . .

Suddenly there flashed into Frank's mind another picture—that of Secretary of State Cristofer, whose image had at first been constant on his screen, then had abruptly commenced to flicker!

Some horrible thing was happening to these humans, then. Frank's eyes narrowed as he thought of the base injustice of these beings invading earth, stamping humans with their mark in some foul way. He restrained himself with an effort from attacking the repellant creature before him. It was more important to find out just what fate was overtaking men. He forced himself to be calm.

"And the exact method of this—this substitution?" he asked.

Zeno drew himself up arrogantly. "That," he rasped exultantly, "is the method I personally devised! Lesser Rogats attempted to gain control of human society by working up to power within its framework. They were met with a difficulty that had seemed trivial, but proved insurmountable. They found that no earth leader can hide his life history. And we Rogats had no life history on earth! This circumstance would arouse suspicion—and that we must avoid at all costs. How to become rulers, and yet have a life history back of us? By a brilliant stroke of mental power, I devised the method by which we now substitute for humans already in power. By one stroke, we acquire both their position and their life history!"

Zeno paused, his eyes gleaming. "I have little time to toy with you, earth-man. We are about to project our substitute for a high official of your government, a necessary step before we supplant the President himself. Your ruler had to be left to the last for, unlike other rulers, he is accessible to many people, and the danger of detection was hence greater."

He turned, barked to an assistant, "Inform Zakka to make ready." Again he faced Frank. "While Zakka is preparing, perhaps you will be interested in an explanation of our life-principle that makes my plan possible. You have learned much, earth-man, but you could not have guessed all! Know, then, the one true plan of life, the plan by which we Rogats exist—that of Projection from the Eternal Source!"

Zeno's eyes glowed with fanaticism. "Perhaps a simple analogy familiar to you will make understandable our life-principle. Moving pictures, such as you have on earth to entertain morons, are a series of images projected onto a screen in rapid sequence, so that the motion appears continuous to the eye. Persistence of vision, you call it. Similarly, we Rogats are projections onto our world-screen by the extra-dimensional Source. But we are projected in three dimensions!"

"Solid light!" Frank exclaimed.

"A beam of light," Zeno continued, "or a beam of electrons—it is all the same. Even your earth physicists are learning that matter and light are closely inter-related. Light has weight, drives tiny particles before it, hence it has mass, hence it constitutes a solid body when brought to a focus as a three dimensional image. Hence, we are solid."

Frank's former complacent understanding of natural phenomenon exploded in his brain. When the pieces cleared away he had begun to see. . .

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Image May Die!"

"WHAT," he asked, "is the meaning of the flicker that my camera detected?"

"I," retorted Zeno, "could as well ask you what part movement plays in your life-plan! The 'flicker,' as you so crudely call it, is essential to our movement. For unlike the figures on your motion pictures screen, we have free will. When we determine on an action, the Source focuses the necessary series of three dimensional images into the successive steps of that action. Did we not flicker, we would be frozen into rigidity, just as a motion picture would become a 'still' without successive images to give it movement. Look!"

Frank reeled back as the sinister figure of Zeno abruptly was immobile as a graven image. It was as though he had looked upon the Medusa, been instantly transformed into rigid stone. His bodily movements arrested, his mouth open as it had formed the last word.

The absolute stillness of the weird figure was mesmeric.

With equal abruptness the spell was broken, as Zeno's suspended gestures resumed where they had left off.

"You see?" he rasped. "By a terrific effort of will I stopped the successive images coming—became a 'still.' Few can do it, few dare! For there is danger in it. It is our one and only vulnerable condition."

Zeno paused, his green eyes glinting at Frank. "In telling you this, earthman, I am sealing your doom! We must know, consciously or unconsciously, what action we are going to perform next. *To become bewildered, confused, is fraught with deadly peril!* In confusion, the necessary impulses do not go out to guide the projection of succeeding images. That one, motionless image may then be destroyed. But here is Zakka, ready to be projected into the earth plane. Gruda, make ready the refocusing machine at once."

Zeno jutted his face into Frank's. "Possibly you can guess what prominent earth-being is to have the honor of being supplanted by Vakka?"

Frank wheeled around, as he caught sight of the being addressed as Vakka. Before him was John Greyson, vice president of the United States! No, it was a Rogat whose resemblance to Greyson had been made even closer by some uncanny method of makeup. Vakka wore earth clothes. Made, Frank knew, of some organic material of this plane which flickered, like the Rogats themselves.

Zeno, Gruda and Vakka strode purposively over to what looked like a large Sperry searchlight, with a small door opening behind the huge lens.

Frank followed, prodded by Zumma's vibro-gun.

Zeno turned a switch, and the laboratory was filled with a low, deep humming. An almost imperceptible blue glow shot from the huge lens—a bluish parallel beam that strained the eye to follow.

"This bluish ray," explained Gruda, grinning, "is a scanning ray. It is not an ordinary beam of light, but is derived from the Source. Truly parallel, it impinges upon the earth space-time frame, and where it impinges, is shown on the screen over the lens, by a reflection impulse. If you will look at the screen, you will see just where I am directing the ray into the earth plane."

Frank glanced quickly up. With a start, he recognized the humans whose images were on the screen. Members of the President's cabinet! Also in the group was John Greyson, vice president, an old and experienced statesman who at the President's insistence, often attended Cabinet meetings when Killgrain was unable to be present.

Greyson was standing, angrily pounding the desk before him.

"YOU see," Zeno grated, "the vice-president declines to use his great influence in favor of seizing South Ameri-

ca and Canada—the starting point of our war in the Western Hemisphere, I might add. The War Secretary, with whom he is arguing, is already a Rogat. Three of those in the room are projection beings! We will now see if we cannot make the vice president more amenable to reason. Vakka, enter the refocusing device. Take the same bodily posture as that of Greyson on the screen."

Frank bit his lip. Some sinister fate was about to befall Greyson. He was powerless to aid the man. He must stay calm and learn how the substitution was made. But he flicked a quick glance at Zumma, still holding the vibro-gun, then mentally measured the distance to the Gade transitional machine.

"As you now realize," Zeno was saying, "the multiple universes co-exist in different space-time frames. Now, an ordinary beam of light will not penetrate outside the universe of its origin. But the projections of the extra-dimensional Source are not bound by this limitation. To the Source, the different co-existent universes seem like a series of frames, or screens, side by side. It is as easy for the Source to project our images onto one frame as onto another. However, an additional factor, or impetus, is needed to shift the projection of a Rogat from this space-time frame to that of the earth frame."

He made some adjustments. "You see that Vakka is now back of the lens, in the same bodily posture as that of Greyson in the screen. Being an image, a focal point of light rays, Vakka can be reflected by a mirror. When I pull this switch, a huge paraboloid mirror will be exposed back of Vakka. With the speed of light, his image will be reflected by the mirror, shot through the lens along this scanning ray, and arrive at a new focal point where it impinges upon the earth plane. The ray is now directed upon the Secretary, John Greyson."

Zeno placed his hand upon the switch, glared over his shoulder at Frank. "You," he hissed, "are about to see Vakka refocused into the space now occupied by the living body of John Greyson!"

Frank leaped forward. "Stop!" he shouted horrifiedly. It was too late. As Zumma pressed a gun into Frank's side, Zeno jammed down the switch.

For an instant the vague blue ray shooting from the lens seemed to thicken slightly. Frank forced his gaze to the image of Greyson on the screen. He thought he detected a fleeting expression of shocked agony. Then it was gone, and Greyson was arguing as before with the Secretary of War. But a subtle change had come over his demeanor. He was no longer Greyson, he was—Vakka! And now he appeared to be agreeing with the War Secretary. . .

With a wild cry, Frank sprang before the lens. Vakka had vanished from within. Frank staggered back. He forced himself to think calmly, analyze what he had seen. That was vital. Sternly, he brought his mind to bear on the problem.

The recurrent images of Vakka, flashed into the space occupied by Greyson's body, had almost instantly dissipated the vice president into his component electrons—knocked them free from their orbits to float away unnoticed in eddies of air. For each one of those thousands of successive images of Vakka was as solid as Greyson's one, solitary body. And even though some of the images were destroyed in the substitution process, they were instantly followed by perfect images.

That was why the spider had proved indestructible! That was what had happened to the knife when he had injected it into the radius of the spider's body. The constant recurrence of unmutilated spider images had bombarded the electrons of the knife, sent them flying. A million times more effective than the bombardment of atoms within a cyclotron or Wil-

son cloud chamber. The spider and other lesser creatures had been projected first, just as earth scientists experiment on mice or guinea pigs first, to find the probable effect of an experiment on human beings.

"As you can see," Zeno's irritatingly sardonic chuckle came to Frank's ear, "the vice-president is suddenly reasonable, amenable. And tonight, while he is addressing the world, the President himself will be substituted—"

SOMETHING snapped within Frank's brain. The projection beings were suddenly given a violent exhibition of earthly fisticuffs. A sharp, swishing fist sent Zumma reeling. Frank hurled his weight against Gruda, bounced off against Zeno.

As he sprang toward the raised dais he had Zumma's vibro-gun in his hand. It was useless against these beings, but—

Leaping to the side of the glass cylinder he turned, wondering at the lack of pursuit. Amazedly, he saw that the three figures were motionless, as if they had been snapped in the act of falling to the floor.

He suddenly knew what had happened. His lightning attack had confused them, forced them into motions they had not intended nor anticipated! Images had ceased coming. They could now be destroyed.

His arm flew up, gun leveled at the statuesque figures. He depressed the lever, just as Zeno started to move.

Gruda and Zumma vanished from the annihilating blast, but Zeno's images were again flowing. The attendants at the other end of the laboratory were now rushing up.

Quickly, Zeno recovered, his lips drew back in a snarl, a vibro-gun leaped into his hand. Frank wheeled, dived into the cylinder just as a blast from Zeno's gun singed a trail of cloudiness across the glass.

Inside, Frank wrenched at the switch, jammed it into the "Return" groove.

Instantly, came the terrific shock that he had experienced before. Another shock —and another! Shocks followed in rapid succession, till he wondered how he could live on. He stopped counting, noticing. This seemed to have gone on forever.

Suddenly the shocks ceased, and he was lying on the floor of the Gade machine, back in the attic of his home.

Dazedly, still gripping the weapon wrested from Zumma, he rose.

He knew what had happened. The "cosmic waterwheel" revolved in one direction continuously. Therefore, in returning to his own universe, he had to wait for every space-time frame in the wheel to pass his inert body by, until his own universe, to which his inertia was adjusted, arrived. He had made a complete circuit of the multiple universes.

He jerked himself erect, thinking of the task to be performed. Very cautiously, he lowered himself into the dark room, crept out to the laboratory. There were no police present. They had doubtless thought Zeno would destroy him in the other realm, and departed.

His camera, forgotten, was still about his chest. He took the reel shot at the political meeting, and put it in his pocket. The projection machine he put in a box, and carrying it under an arm crept cautiously out the back way. From a drug store five blocks from his house he called a taxi, ordered the driver to drive to the Capitol.

As the blocks swept by, he thought rapidly. In his hands was the fate of the world. If he could save the President from being substituted by a Rogat tonight there was a chance. The President would lift his powerful voice in a plea for a return to democracy and freedom throughout the world. Brave listeners in all countries would be aroused.

But before he got to that point, just

after his introductory remarks, a vague blue ray would surround his slight form. A projection being resembling Killgrain would be refocussed into the area occupied by his body. Then the speech that the world was straining to hear would be one to whip up the American people to a state of war fever. Soon humans would be killing each other off, with Rogats waiting impatiently to take over the earth.

FRANK swore softly. That must not happen! The President must not be substituted. The projection beings in that vast audience must be destroyed in some way, without at the same time harming the humans. How to tell which was which?

Frank sat bolt upright. His vague plan suddenly shone out in his mind full formed. "Faster," he ordered the taxi driver. "Faster!"

At the Capitol, Frank was ushered into the presence of Senator Roarback. This was one of the statesmen whose image on Frank's screen had shown no flicker. As he looked up into the grave, massive features he knew there had been no substitution yet. It was a wonder, too, for this man's great voice had echoed throughout the land in behalf of the immemorial liberties of the people. Possibly the Rogats had been unable to prepare a projection being to sufficiently resemble him. None who had that granite jaw, impressive nose, features that belonged on Stone Mountain.

Frank displayed his proof, reran the films he had taken at the meeting. Rapidly he talked.

When he had finished the Senator sat immobile, his expression one of shocked uncertainty. Yet, he was distinctly aware that insidious influences were at work. And those films . . .

Frank had omitted his visit to the Rogat realm. That would have been too much for credence. He had advanced his knowledge in the form of theory, pointing out that one man after another high in government had suddenly switched to an attitude favorable to the dark forces in the world.

Slowly, Senator Roarback nodded his massive head. "I will fall in with your plan, Linklater," he said gravely. "It would be folly not to. If you are right, you will be the savior of Democracy." He leaned over, pressed a button.

CHAPTER FIVE

Interference!

THAT evening the great Capitol auditorium was jammed to the last seat with humanity—and others! An air of tense, strained expectancy brooded over it, an air charged with menace. In a moment the President of the United States was to walk on, commence his speech to the people of America and the world. He would make introductory remarks, then, a blue haze would envelop him. . .

Only three persons knew that the President at that moment was asleep in a totally darkened room in the White House. He had had to be put to sleep, because he had declined to listen to Senator Roarback's suggestion that he cancel the speech temporarily. But the President's personal physician had been more amenable. He gave the President a sleeping potion readily enough, when the Senator had convinced him that an assassination attempt was to be made.

At 8:30 p.m. Frank Linklater walked onto the platform of the Capitol auditorium. Resting on his nose was a pair of large, shell-rimmed glasses. His dark brows were drawn down in a frown, his jaw jutted out. He looked like the President in a determined mood.

A roar of approval went up. Frank raised his arm in a commanding gesture. He wet his lips, tried to control his tense nervousness. Was he even now being

scanned by the Rogat's refocusing machine? Were the images of a projection being about to arrive in the place occupied by his body, knock him into an invisible chaos of free electrons?

The many voiced roar died, gave place to tense silence. Frank dropped his arm. It was a signal for the lights in the vast auditorium to go out. The place was instantly in utter darkness.

"Remain seated, everyone." Frank's voice was calm, firm. "The lights will be on again immediately." There was a brief wait, then light returned.

But they were different lights, made according to Frank's specifications by the Capitol electricians. The lights, placed back of swiftly revolving fans, were flickering on and off many thousands of times a second—so fast as to appear continuous to the eye.

In Frank's hand was a small control switch. Intently watching the puzzled, restless audience before him, he slowly moved the switch, changing the speed at which the light flickered. Abruptly, as the switch reached a certain point, about half of the vast audience became invisible. Through the control switch, the flickering of the lights had been exactly synchronized with the flickering of the projection beings in the audience!

During the instant in which their three dimensional images were present, the light was cut off; as the beings flickered out, the light came on. The result was that the projection beings were in constant darkness!

A GASP of amazement went up. Before it could turn into a disturbance, Frank held up his hand wordlessly. Then he seized a large placard lying on an easel, whirled it around with the words exposed to the view of the visible audience. The Rogats, being in constant darkness, couldn't see it—but they could still have heard the spoken word!

Another gasp went up. The words on the placard were:

TIME BOMB WILL GO OFF HERE IN TEN MINUTES
PASS OUT QUIETLY. DO NOT TALK

The vast visible audience moved in a stream toward the exits, guided by pages who efficiently prevented the exit from turning to riot.

In five minutes the great hall had been cleared of humans. Frank stood motionless on the platform, waiting.

The phenomenon he was expecting soon developed. Here and there a projection being sprang suddenly into visibility. But each of these figures was motionless, frozen by surprise into statuesque rigidity!

Frank watched, until he was sure all had become visible. "All right, sergeant," he yelled.

A staccato military command came from the wings. "Forward march!" A squad of regulars of the United States Army marched out.

"Halt. Right face!" In the arm of each was a light machine gun.

"Fire at will!"

The sinister but satisfying clatter of machine guns rang out, as bullets raked the auditorium from end to end. Raked two thousand rigid, motionless bodies, hurled them to the floor.

The clatter died away. One of the men exclaimed loudly, dropping his machine gun. The sergeant didn't even notice the offense. He was staring bulge-eyed at the sprawled figures at which his men had been pumping lead.

"What tha—they're vanishing, going up in thin air!"

The strewn carcasses were fast becoming fewer. Now one would vanish, now another. Then a whole group would disappear.

Frank, gazing intently at the spectacle, got the distinct impression that each with-

drawal of a body was akin to jerking a finger from a hot stove. A sort of instinctive wincing from pain.

One after another the immobile, mangled carcasses vanished. Presently the vast auditorium was bare.

FRANK gave a sigh that was almost a groan. Every important projection in America had been wiped out. That was the start. The next step was to explain to the President, with the help of Senator Roarback, then tackle Europe. Tiredly, he turned to go out, and nearly bumped into —Zeno! The master of the projection beings stood there, glaring at him smolderingly, vibro-weapon leveled.

"I see through your disguise," he hissed. "We have been scanning this platform for the President, found it in darkness. I had myself refocused to take charge here. You are trying to trick us! Quick, where is the real President?"

What snapped Frank out his tired lethargy was the blue haze. The Rogats, still scanning the platform for the President, had caught sight of him, thought he was Killgrain. At any instant the images of the substitute Rogat would arrive, batter his body into a chaos of dissolute electrons.

In a mad attempt to escape the blue haze, Frank dove at Zeno, grasped him, whirled the Rogat around directly in back of him. He leaped toward the wings—then brought up short. As he had hurled Zeno into the haze, the images began arriving.

Transfixed, Frank gazed on, as two projection beings strove to occupy the same space at the same time, their successive images battering at each other, knocking each other's atoms helter skelter in a fury of unknown forces.

In agonized postures, the two entangled, contorted figures began to flicker perceptibly. Their images were coming slowly enough now for Frank to see the successive arrivals. A few more desultory flickers—and both Rogats vanished, blinked into nothing.

Frank leaned weakly against the wall, unnerved. Bannerhorn, a radio commentator, rushed up.

"Mr. President," the man yelled excitedly, grabbing Frank's arm. "Crazy reports from abroad. Something has happened to every dictator on earth. Can't understand it. It's unbelievable, cockeyed."

Frank grabbed the man, shook him. "Get yourself together," he snapped. "*What* has happened?"

BANNERHORN subsided. "The dictators have vanished," he said tersely. "In every foreign country. Reports started coming over the short wave just a few minutes ago. In Middle Europe the dictator was making a speech before thousands. Suddenly he became rigid. Then, according to our correspondent, he—he flickered a few times, then vanished. So did most of the men on the platform with him. From all countries, the same cockeyed reports—"

Quickly, Frank surmised what had happened. Two thousand projection beings had been destroyed en masse; this had caused a severe shock to the Source—a crossing and short circuiting of nerve impulses, a jamming of an unthinkable extra-dimensional mechanism!

Frank grabbed Bannerhorn. "Come with me," he ordered, "to the White House."

"Say, wait a minute!" Bannerhorn jerked belligerently at his arm. "I just got a good look at you. You're not the President."

Frank removed his glasses. "Of course I'm not, I merely substituted for him."

"But why?"

"To save him from being substituted!"

THE END

BLUE BOY

The web-fingered, blue-clad, amphibious exile from Venus was deceptively man-like, but it wasn't really a man, as Harry Bradford learned—to his intense joy!

By E. A. GROSSER

FOR AN alleged murderer, Harry Bradford was quite happy. The big wind that had puffed him onto this deserted island had been a blessing, very well disguised at the time. Of course, Eden without Eve possessed an air of loneliness, but a guy in the middle of an ocean without a boat couldn't afford to be choosy about islands.

While he sat on the white sandy lagoon beach, rocking back and forth slowly, his fingers locked together over his knees, he tried to enumerate his blessings.

First, and foremost, there was the complete absence of policemen to consider. But that was a negative blessing. You couldn't properly appreciate the comfort of *not* sitting on a bunch of kilowatts, until after you had.

On the breathing, smelling, tasting side of the ledger there was breadfruit . . . coconuts . . . fish . . .

Then, of course, there was the healthy outdoor life and the good salt air. Bradford sighed. Eden!—but no Eve! And it was such a comfort to be able to confide your troubles to a sympathetic woman.

Suddenly he ceased rocking; even ceased chewing his last stick of gum. His mouth remained half-open while he stared at an ever-widening ring on the smooth water. There it was again!

It must be a seal, he tried to persuade himself. The thought would have been comforting. But whoever saw a blue-eyed seal? Nonsense! He was seeing things. Such a beast sounded altogether too much like a compatriot of the purple cow.

He parked the gum behind a wisdom tooth for safe-keeping, began to whistle softly to himself. Shortly, he got to his feet and shuffled down the beach.

He stared at the lagoon and saw a blue cranium project slowly above the surface of the water. His tuneless whistling faded to silence, and he found himself looking directly into a pair of blue eyes set in a white face.

Without intending to, he dived in, arms outstretched in front of him. He grasped the strange blue thing. It had a chill rubbery feel. But a moment later his head contacted the blue cranium in a forcible manner and two lax bodies floated in the water.

THE blue one recovered first. One blue arm twitched and came above the surface. But the blue color ended at the wrist. The rest, the hand, was white, and it was large, extremely long-fingered, and thoroughly *webbed*.

The white face came above the surface. There was an eager gasping for air, then the thing saw Bradford. The long webbed fingers clenched in his hair. The blue one turned in the water and sped toward shore, towing Bradford along.

The strange one stood up in the shallow water and it took only a glance to see that the other hand was like the first. And when it strode onto the beach with Bradford trailing from one hand, it took only another glance to see that its feet were similar. But a stare was inevitable, because they were much more so and on a larger scale.



It released Bradford and he fell loosely to the sand and lay unconscious. It started back toward the lagoon, then halted to look down at Bradford. The blue eyes seemed anxious.

It went to the water's edge and stooped, spreading and curving its fingers to form a large cup for the salty water. Bradford received the contents of the strange cup in his face at the moment he was recovering and, to him, it seemed sort of gilding-the-lily.

He sat up, sputtering.

He stared at it, and it stared at him. His eyes widened when he saw the strange hands and feet, then he looked back at the face. It wasn't polite to stare, and besides the face was much more pleasant. He could see now that the blue covering was not skin, but by some stretching of the imagination could be called clothing.

"Did you pull me out?" he asked ruefully.

He sat up straighter at the hissing and sputtering that answered his question. He looked more closely at the face in front of him. The blue eyes were bright and intelligent, and the features handsomely

even. A little too handsome, Bradford thought, but every little helped when you considered those hands and feet. He got to his feet and found that he was several inches taller than the stranger. He reeled weakly and one of the webbed hands went to his arm to steady him. It did a lot more than that. It determined him to stand alone. The touch was not unpleasant, but he could not forget those webs.

He reached up to remove the stranger's hand and the stranger must have misinterpreted the action, for the blue-clad one leaped back. Bradford remained frozen, one hand in front of his chest as though reaching for his other arm. He tried to move, but could not. It was as though his arms had been paralyzed.

Then the paralysis was gone and Bradford was feeling in an exploratory way of his arms. They tingled as though they had been "asleep." The stranger spluttered at him.

Bradford shook his head uncomprehendingly. "I like to know how you did that," he said. "Guess I'll have to teach you English, or maybe it would be quicker for me to learn your language."

NO ONE could truthfully say that Harry Bradford didn't try to learn the stranger's language. But at the end of a week he was sure of the meaning of less than a dozen words, while the stranger had a good command of English.

"Where did you come from, Blue Boy?" Bradford asked lazily, stretching on the sand to let the sun warm him through.

"The second planet from the sun," Blue Boy answered, turning away to stare across the lagoon at the farthermost part of the atoll.

Bradford stiffened. *"What?"* he demanded, then quickly relaxed. The hands and feet weren't the only things about this guy that were queer.

"Yes," said Blue Boy dreamily, "Venus, you call it. It's a wonderful world. . . . warm, shallow seas . . . many islands . . . and our cities. We are much ahead of you in science. We have had a regular passenger and freight service to Mars for over a hundred years."

"Then how come you are so much like us?" asked Bradford.

Blue Boy grinned. "That is a question that has puzzled both the Martians and us. They are like us in most ways, too. The only real differences are that they have very large chests and ears; and they are a bit furry."

"Sounds attractive."

"They are," assured Blue Boy. "And they are very intelligent. The only solution we have been able to suggest is that at some time in the distant past we were all the inhabitants of one world; and you say that men have dug up the remains of ancient men on this world, and we haven't on Mars or Venus—so I guess this is that world."

But Blue Boy spoke in a negligent manner; he seemed hardly interested. He stared across the lagoon with dreaming eyes, and there was a troubled frown on his forehead.

"What's worrying you, Blue?" asked Bradford. "Don't you like it here?"

"Oh, it is fine. This island is almost like some of ours at home, but . . . only . . . well, I like you and I don't like to see you blamed for a murder."

Bradford laughed contentedly. "Don't let it bother you," he advised. "As long as they only *blame* me, I don't care."

"You don't care?" Blue Boy was shocked.

Bradford shook his head. "No . . . why should I? As long as they don't catch me."

Blue Boy's eyes glowed with a fanatic light. "You see?" he said eagerly. "It would always worry you. You can never be free until you clear your name. Your conscience—"

"My conscience is clear!" snarled Bradford. "Even if it was my gun, I didn't shoot the rat."

THERE was only the sound of the surf on the outer reef to break the silence and Bradford had become so accustomed to that sound that he hardly heard it. Finally he asked:

"If you people on Mars and Venus have been shooting around space for so long, why didn't you drop in to see us some time?"

Blue Boy acted as though he hadn't heard. "Harry, could you get back to San Francisco?"

"Sure! Just hunt up the first cop and tell him who I am, and I'd be back there so damn quick I'd be dizzy."

"I mean, could you get back there by yourself. I think it would be a nice gesture for you to walk in and give yourself up."

"Well, I suppose I could cable Lois. She's a smart little trick and would catch on quick. And she would get the money from my old man and send it to me."

"Harry! Do that and I will help you. You can go back—"

"—and get hung," completed Bradford.

"I wish you'd go back," Blue Boy persisted. "I'll help you?"

"How?"

"Well, you know how I made you tell the truth."

"Hypnosis," Bradford snorted. "I'll bet that's why you learned English and I didn't learn your language."

"No, I didn't hypnotize you. Lies require thought—imagination."

"Amen!" agreed Bradford. "You should have seen me thinking about an alibi. But it was no good."

"And if you confuse a person, paralyze his imagination, he'll tell the truth."

"Hmmmm. That would be a help all right," Bradford admitted.

"Then you will go back?"

"Lord! You are persistent! All right, if we can get to Pago Pago, I'll get the money from Lois." He lay back, feeling absolutely safe.

BUT his feeling of safety melted away from Blue Boy's happy words:

"I'll borrow a boat from the natives of the next island."

Bradford sat up, watched Blue Boy start away.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

Blue Boy halted. "I'll swim to the next island and borrow a boat."

Bradford groaned and muttered, "Damn those webs." Aloud, he demanded, "First, tell me why you happen to be here. Was it a question of morals? Were you trying to persuade somebody to do the 'right' thing."

Blue Boy nodded miserably and patted the water with a splayed foot. "They said I belonged here with the rest of the trouble-makers; and they called me the awfullest names!"

"I can sympathize," said Bradford, not specifying with whom.

"But you will go back, won't you?" Blue Boy asked anxiously.

Bradford hesitated, then nodded. "I guess we are both fools. But I keep expecting a cop to tap me on the shoulder."

Blue Boy secured the boat as promised, but when they reached Tutuila, Bradford was as surprised as he might have been at the other's insistence on returning the craft while he communicated with Lois. He was becoming acquainted with Blue Boy's quibbling sense of moral values. When Blue Boy said, borrow; he meant, borrow.

Lois came through nobly with the money, though a bit openly, and Bradford waited anxiously—not at all sure whether he would see Blue Boy or the inside of a jail first. He bought a ready-made suit

for Blue Boy, the largest pair of shoes on the island, and started to buy gloves. Then he reconsidered and made it mittens.

But Blue Boy was not appreciative. He regarded the garments as a person would regard instruments of torture.

"Go on, try 'em," pleaded Bradford. "We can't go anywhere with you looking like a circus freak. The whole thing is off unless you wear these."

He grinned while Blue Boy struggled to encase the webbed feet in canvas and rubber. But when it was done and the mittens were on, he looked at his strange companion with quiet satisfaction. Blue Boy looked a lot more human than most people.

But the incident destroyed something in their friendship. Thereafter Blue Boy was more silent and kept to himself. Bradford saw very little of him, except as a fellow passenger on the Clipper. It was only when they passed over the Golden Gate Bridge and flew towards the Treasure Island air base that he displayed any acute interest. Blue Boy showed a keen, silent interest in all about them as the Clipper landed and they proceeded to San Francisco.

BRADFORD halted the cab and they got out. He paid the driver, then led Blue Boy along the sidewalk, intending to get another about a block away, to break their trail.

"My feet hurt," complained Blue Boy when Bradford halted in front of a newsstand.

"You'll feel better when they are broken in," Bradford replied absently, staring at a black headline. He bought the paper hastily.

"But I don't want to be broken in," snapped Blue Boy. "I don't like shoes!"

Bradford didn't hear. He was reading the paper. He turned suddenly and grasped Blue Boy's arm with tense fingers. He held up the paper for the other to read, then realized that Blue Boy couldn't and said:

"They are going to execute my cousin for killing Carter—that's the guy I was supposed to have killed!"

"Execute him! Do you kill people here?"

"Sure. . . . what did you think we did?"

"Why, recondition them, as any civilized people would. Oh, we've got to save him!"

"How?"

"Where is he?"

"San Quentin. Say! Do you mean you got me to come all the way back here and didn't know I was facing death. I'll bet you just wanted me to come back here and be 'reconditioned'," he finished suspiciously.

"Don't argue! We've got to save him. Take me to San Quentin!"

"The devil you say! That's the last place in the world I want to see. Did you think you'd have me reconditioned?"

"Yes, but you are going to be executed if you don't keep your voice down," snapped Blue Boy.

Bradford looked around quickly. They were attracting attention, and there was a policeman on the corner. He grasped Blue Boy's arm and hurried away.

"You dirty little double-crosser," he snarled. "I've a good mind to—"

Blue Boy twisted loose. "Police! Police! Here's the man who killed Carter!"

Bradford wanted to do a little work on Blue Boy, but when he saw the policeman coming at a gallop, he felt that he couldn't spare the time. He turned and ran.

"Don't worry!" shouted Blue Boy, as Bradford disappeared around the corner with the policeman in pursuit. The officer was flourishing his gun, but the crowd was so thick that he didn't dare shoot. Bradford dodged across the street and

leaped aboard a streetcar. He got off at the first stop and got aboard another. He repeated the maneuver several times until he finally wound up near a park where he decided to hide until night.

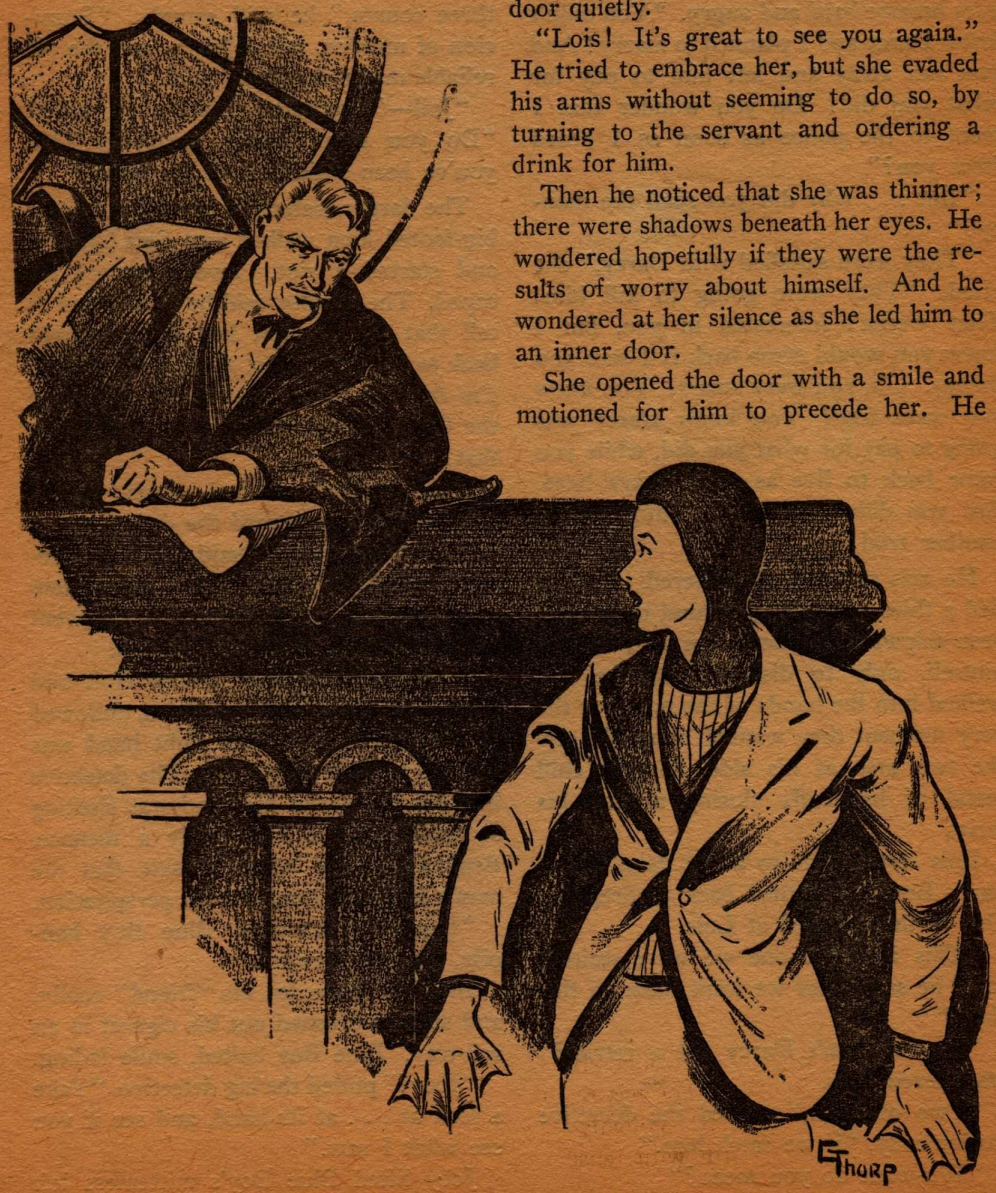
BRADFORD came out of the bushes when it was dark and silently headed for Lois Chalmers' home. He would rather have gone to his own home, but he knew that would lead him into the hands of the police. He knew it was hopeless for him to try to escape the city. A man might dodge the police net once, but never twice.

He went up the steps to the door of the Chalmers' home and rang the bell. Lois, herself, answered the summons and he slipped into the house. She shut the door quietly.

"Lois! It's great to see you again." He tried to embrace her, but she evaded his arms without seeming to do so, by turning to the servant and ordering a drink for him.

Then he noticed that she was thinner; there were shadows beneath her eyes. He wondered hopefully if they were the results of worry about himself. And he wondered at her silence as she led him to an inner door.

She opened the door with a smile and motioned for him to precede her. He



went into the room, then halted. Two men rose from chairs near the fireplace. He heard the door close behind him, and turned to face Lois.

"Who are these men?" he asked sharply.

Lois was still smiling, and now he detected a note of bitterness. "They want to talk to you," she said quietly, but speaking seemed to break her reserve. Her eyes became hard and angry. "You didn't know Darcy and I planned to marry! And you ran away and left him to pay for what you did! Do you wonder that I went to the police as soon as I heard from you?"

"But . . . why did you send the money?"

"They were satisfied with Darcy," she cried. "They were going to kill him! They weren't interested in you, but I knew you would come back if I sent you money. Oh, you were smart! You knew you were free! You knew Darcy was going to pay for what you did, while you came back to live as you always have. But you didn't count on Darcy getting another trial!"

He was stunned—bewildered. He had fled a third of the way around the world, been shipwrecked, then crept back to clear himself, only to discover that he had walked into the hands of the police at the very moment they wanted him. He saw the two men at his side, felt the chill metal of handcuffs closing around his wrist.

Lois stood aside to allow them to depart. But they turned back to fireplace. One of them smiled at Lois.

"This isn't the one we were waiting for," he said, "but we want them all this time."

"B—but won't Darcy get a retrial?" stammered Lois.

"Two of them," replied the detective sardonically, "if we catch him."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

A great light dawned in Bradford's mind. "Blue Boy!" he exploded. The others turned on him quickly. He sat down and clumsily lighted a cigaret.

"So you know something about that, too?" said the larger of the two detectives. He seemed to be in command.

"I'll bet he was in on it," offered the other quickly.

The larger nodded sagely. "That makes three counts," he said smugly. "Suspicion of murder, jail delivery, and the old reliable material witness stuff."

"Jail—" repeated Lois, then asked, "Do you mean Darcy escaped? That you've been waiting here for him?"

The larger detective nodded. "Some big-footed loon walked into San Quentin and started a riot. Two prisoners escaped. The warden said he was forced to tell that Darcy Holt had been brought back to San Francisco. And an hour later, I'm damned if the loon didn't walk into the City Jail and take him out—just like that!"

The doorbell chimed. Lois turned quickly and ran toward the door.

"Catch her, Joey!" said the larger detective, and Joey did. "Now, keep them quiet and I'll get the others." He went out, closing the door behind him.

A few seconds later Darcy Holt and Blue Boy came into the room, followed by the detective. Holt's right hand was coupled to Blue Boy's left. The detective held his pistol, but his hand was shaking so badly that it was really a menace. Bradford smiled when he saw that the man's face was beaded with perspiration.

"Harry!" exclaimed Blue Boy happily, starting forward.

Bradford regarded his "friend" coolly, and silently crushed out his cigaret in an ash-tray. Blue Boy halted, smile fading.

"Joey!" puffed the big detective. "Take a look at . . . at *its* hand, and see if you see what I saw."

Joey lifted Blue Boy's mittenless left

hand, then dropped it and stepped back.

"Jeeze! Whatta we got ourselves into?" he asked hoarsely. "A circus?"

"I dunno," stated the other vaguely, "but I'm going get rid of this bunch as quick as I can. I don't wanna be around 'em any longer'n I hafta."

"You and me both," agreed Joey. Then, while the big man called headquarters, Joey started to chuckle.

"Whatta ya laughin' at?" the big man demanded.

"Wh-whatta good time *Mister* Aikins is gonna have, taking fingerprints," Joey laughed.

THERE was only one comforting thought in Bradford's mind while he sat in his cell through the night . . . Blue Boy was in jail also. The fact puzzled Bradford. Why hadn't Blue just paralyzed the detectives and walked away? It looked like more dirty work at the crossroads.

Morning came grudgingly and Bradford was led toward the court. At the door an unsavory individual accosted him, pressed a card into his hand.

"Myers and Belenoe, bail-bond brokers," he said hastily. "We'll go your bail and you'll never get rich."

"Glad yer telling the truth," said Bradford's guard. "It must hurt. Get outa the way!"

The little man, biting his tongue, stepped aside and watched them go into court.

"Can't understand it," muttered the guard, shaking his head. "He never told the truth before in his life."

Neither could Bradford understand, until he saw that Blue Boy was already in the courtroom. He smiled, unthinkingly, and Blue Boy smiled with him as their eyes met. Bradford stifled his smile and turned away.

Lois Chalmers was there, too. Only Darcy Holt was missing. But his absence was more than compensated for, by a clerk and a leather-faced judge. Judge Polson scanned the trial docket severely.

"Murder, jail-break, material witness and obstructing justice, and resisting an officer." He cleared his throat and looked down at them with a wolfish smile.

"We'll start with the murder," he said. "That sounds the most promising." His eyes widened with surprise at his own words and in his agitation he took off his glasses and polished them with great care.

"I'm sorry, Your Honor," said the clerk. "That must be a mistake. Darcy Holt, accused and once convicted of the murder of William Carter, has been granted a new trial. But it is not under the jurisdiction of this court."

Judge Polson's face showed his disappointment before he was aware that it showed. He looked at the docket again, and came up smiling.

"We'll take the jail-breaker, then. Ought to be able to stretch that into a decent number of years." He coughed to cover his confusion and, in consequence, didn't hear the clerk agree wryly.

"*Miss* Blue Boy," called the clerk.

Blue Boy stepped forward to take the oath, then faced Judge Polson. Bradford stared. Into his mind's eye came a vision of a rich little island, and "Blue Boy," and himself saying, "You seem to like blue, so Blue Boy it is." Then the vision was blotted out by innumerable iron bars. He groaned.

"But I didn't *break* jail," he heard Blue "Boy" protest. "I was led to believe that Darcy Holt was innocent and merely walked in to prevent a miscarriage of justice."

"And you walked out again, taking Holt with you," accused Polson.

Blue Boy flushed and didn't seem to know what to say. Bradford leaped forward.

"Your Honor, I protest that you aren't giving Blue . . . uh . . . Girl a chance. She

is unacquainted with our ways. She is . . . a foreigner. To her justice and not formality is what counts."

Judge Polson hammered for order, got it, then demanded of Bradford, "Are you Miss Blue Boy's attorney?"

"Yes, and also one of the accused," said Bradford.

Judge Polson looked at Blue Girl questioningly. Bradford nudged her with his elbow, "Say, 'Yes,' " he hissed. "And keep this ghoul telling the truth."

"Yes, Your Honor," she said dutifully in a low voice. "He is my attorney." She was bewildered, and becoming afraid.

Judge Polson grunted his dissatisfaction. "And one of the accused?"

With a shiver Bradford agreed. "I was the cause of this whole trouble."

"Ah!" said Judge Polson from the depths of his soul, and Bradford shivered again. He turned quickly to Blue Girl and asked in a low voice, "Got everything under control?"

She nodded and he faced Judge Polson. "First there is a little matter I would like to clear up. Will you have Darcy Holt brought before the court?"

Judge Polson was interested, in an academic manner, in Holt and agreed. A bailiff left to fetch Holt.

"Haven't you ever done anything wrong, Your Honor?" Bradford asked.

"Not lately," said Judge Polson. "The reformers—" He halted suddenly and his fingers closed longingly over the handle of his gavel as he eyed Bradford's head. Bradford retreated a step.

"YOU see, Your Honor," he said softly, smiling. "It is human to make mistakes. We even have a wonderful word for them—peccadilloes. Now, it is to be expected that Blue Girl, a foreigner from a country where customs are much different than ours, should make a few small ones."

"Like breaking into San Quentin and freeing prisoners from the local prison," murmured Judge Polson sardonically.

Bradford stepped close. "Better be good," he said. "You can't lie to me, and I'll ask some embarrassing questions if you aren't. I'll show you what I mean." He stepped back out of reach and asked, "Your Honor, would you like to see your own son before this court?"

"Sure, if he had to be in front of any," said Judge Polson.

"You mean that this court would be prejudiced?"

"Yes," said Judge Polson, then wilted. "That isn't a fair question. I wouldn't try the case." He looked around the court nervously, alert for reporters. He saw none and faced Bradford, red-faced and angry.

The bailiff came in with Darcy Holt. They halted nearby. Lois Chalmers ran to Holt, then they were separated.

"Got him under control, too?" Bradford asked Blue Girl, and she nodded.

"Darcy," he said. "Did you kill Carter?"

"Yes," said Holt, then paled.

"Why?"

"Because he was blackmailing me and wouldn't wait until after I married," Holt confessed.

Bradford waved him away. There was a moan from Lois and Blue Girl hastened to her side. Bradford grinned at the judge.

"I just wanted it in the record," he said. "Now, shall I ask some more questions? . . . for instance: Have you ever taken any bribes?"

"No!" thundered Judge Polson. "You little . . . little . . . I'll put you away for life."

"Blue!" wailed Bradford. "Blue Girl! What's the matter?"

Blue Girl returned to his side. "Ask him again," she invited, looking up at the judge innocently. "I forgot."

Judge Polson rapped for order.

"Charges dismissed!" he said quickly and started for his chambers.

"All three of us," Bradford specified.

The judge nodded dumbly and staggered on his way.

THEY took Lois home, then as though by a magnet, were drawn to the seashore. Bradford tossed some sand in his cupped hand listlessly.

There was silence for a moment then Bradford asked, "What were some of those names called you when they kicked you off your ship?"

She spoke in Venusian, but the tone was convincing.

"Do any of them mean Jonah?" he asked, then had to explain the reason for Jonah's acquaintance with the whale.

"They all do," she confessed.

He waited a few seconds, then asked, "How come I made such a big mistake—thought you were a boy? I'm not any blinder than most men."

"We don't develop to maturity until—until something inside tells us it is time," she said hesitantly.

"You mean, you adolesce all at once?" Bradford chuckled. Then he started and faced her quickly. "You mean when you fall in love?"

She nodded, but didn't look at him.

He gazed out over the sea again. "Do you think you could find that island again?" he asked at last.

"I'm going back there to live," she said.

"You mean *we* are," he corrected.

She faced him. "You . . . you mean you are going too? That you don't hate my . . . hands and feet?"

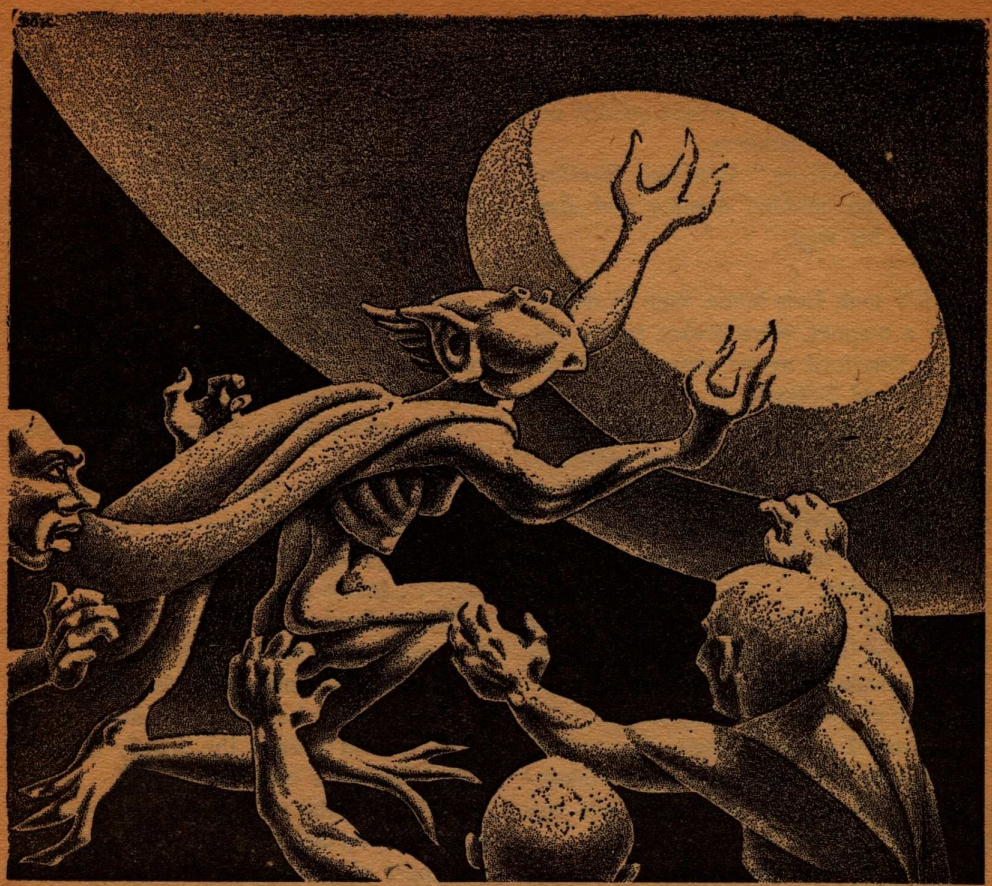
"Hate 'em? . . . honey, I love 'em. And even if you are a Jonah, you can't get in trouble in the middle of the ocean."

She leaped to her feet and, catching his hand, started toward the water. But he pulled her back into his arms.

"Wait awhile, sweetheart. I'm not as lucky as you are. We'll have to take a boat part of the way."

THE END

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Super Science Stories, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1940. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Super Science Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1940. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 26, Register's No. 2-W-178. (My commission expires March 30, 1942.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.



ANOTHER'S EYES

A Super Science Brief

By JOHN L. CHAPMAN

THE two ships were but tiny specks now, diminishing rapidly in the velvet curtain that filled the massive telescope screen. Another moment and they would be lost among the starry mists, first Martian vessels to embark for the third planet from the sun.

For a brief moment the screen showed rocket flame—mere sparks—then dimmed at the silent turn of a switch. The two men who stood in a remote corner of the giant laboratory faced one another gravely.

"They're gone," were the deep-toned words of Larov, the renowned Martian scientist. "And it will be years before they return; years in which the Martian race will continue to wonder what is out there on the third world—"

"I perceive your customary fears," remarked Treylan, his laboratory assistant. "Always the pessimist, Larov. Do you not know that we of Mars have waited countless centuries for this moment? Always we have anticipated the initial flight to Number 3. Now the time has come,

and you—you are the only Martian scientist who is not rejoicing."

Larov paced before the screen. "I can't explain," he breathed, "but I've a feeling our quest will be a failure." He stopped before his assistant, raised his head. "Out there lies Number 3. Our ships have never landed there before. If cosmic neighbors are not discovered there, it will be certain that we of Mars are the only civilized beings in the solar system. And more than that, any possibilities that a race of high intellect could aid us in averting extinction will be gone. As things stand Mars is doomed. It may be possible that the science of Number 3's inhabitants could save us. And years will pass before we know."

WHEN finally the drums became an incessant pounding in the distance, and sleep became more and more impossible, Colonel Vickers ordered a native guide to trace the noises and find the cause of the disturbance. Footsteps sounded presently outside the little hut, and a voice grated: "Confound it, Colonel, what does this mean?"

Dressing hurriedly, the colonel shouted back: "We'll soon know, Campbell. Be with you in a minute."

The two left the colonel's hut and crossed the road, tent-laden camp in the moonlight.

"There was nothing said about trouble with the pygmies," Campbell muttered. "We're supposed to be building a railroad, not fighting African midgets."

"Who said anything about fighting?" snorted Vickers. "It's probably just a ritual of some sort. We'll see."

"But the infernal racket—pygmies don't have such parties at this time of night unless they have a good reason."

"Nonsense. Here comes my guide."

The black man took form at the edge of the valley and approached the two officers. There was a brief babbling.

Campbell looked at the Colonel. "What did he say?"

"Strange," mused Vickers. "He said something about a mass celebration on the side of the knoll—about something huge that spouts flame."

Campbell chuckled. "Come on—let's investigate this black magic."

A pale moon illuminated a narrow path through which the two men proceeded toward the crest of a lofty knoll. As they ascended the steep incline the scent of an inexplicable fire reached their nostrils. Beyond the rim of the hill a deep crimson glow became visible.

"That's not the scent of a campfire," Vickers commented.

They trudged on upward and crossed the top of the knoll. Before them lay a valley similar to the one from which they had just emerged. Some fifty yards away lay a good-sized clearing, in the center of which was taking place the strange nocturnal celebration.

A horde of tiny, short-legged black men were grouped at the edge of the clearing, shouting and pounding their drums exultingly. Not far from them, situated in the exact middle of the clearing, was a vast metal sphere, rising from the jungle thickness silvery and dome-like. From the base of the sphere emanated a ruddy, stale-scented flame—not a fire started by the pygmies, more like an exhaust of some mechanism within the globe.

"Good heavens, Campbell—what would you call that thing?"

"You mean the globe, sir?"

"Of course. What else?"

"I was looking at the captive."

"Captive?"

True, someone was being held securely amidst the pygmies, someone who had come from the strange sphere.

THE captive was but a few inches taller than the little men who clustered about him. His body was thin, his limbs

large and muscular. Tiny, slanted eyes protruded from a face that was minus a nose and mouth. A smooth, satin-like cloak covered his body in turban fashion from the neck to feet.

Some distance from the alien man was another like himself. The second, however, lay silently near an opening in the sphere. There was a gaping wound in his side, faint traces of bluish blood.

The first captive obviously was attempting escape. He wrenched himself about among three pygmies, emitting shrill, piercing cries from his hidden mouth, trying to make his way toward the aperture in the silvery globe.

Colonel Vickers found himself shouting above the noise of the drums. "What do you make of it, Campbell? Who are those two fellows?"

"Can't you see?" yelled back Campbell. "They aren't Earthmen. They're from beyond—some other world. That sphere —it's their means of transportation."

"Nonsense — how could that thing move?"

"Look—the fellow's escaping—"

There was a brief scurry of tiny feet amidst the pygmies. The satin-clothed man detached himself from the group and lunged for the opening in the sphere. A moment later he disappeared within the globe, and a metal door slipped silently over the aperture.

For some time the pygmies stormed the entrance to the queer apparition. Then a sheet of flame seemed to envelope the sphere, and a deafening roar pierced the air. The black men scattered.

Vickers and Campbell saw the globe lift slowly from the jungle to become a second moon in the sky. It hung for a moment above, then, as crimson flame illuminated the night for miles around, it shot upward with increasing rapidity. In only a matter of seconds the sphere was gone.

At length Campbell found his breath. "Now do you believe me, Vickers? There's only one answer—that was a space ship from some other world—perhaps Venus or Mars. Don't you see?"

"Of course," replied Vickers. "That is the only answer, but it's unbelievable—"

He shook his head for lack of speech, and moved on toward the clearing.

The pygmies watched somberly as the two officers inspected the dead alien.

"Dead," said Vickers after a moment. "Look, Campbell, at those powerful arms, and the blankness of the face. No mouth, no nose—only eyes."

"An ugly fellow, wherever he came from," murmured Campbell. "Perhaps it's all for the better that the other escaped. What a commotion they could have caused over the world. Why, one look at them and you'd think they were devils—"

"GHERRA has arrived, Larov." It was Treylan's voice, unmistakably. Larov turned quickly from his work, snapped on the view-screen.

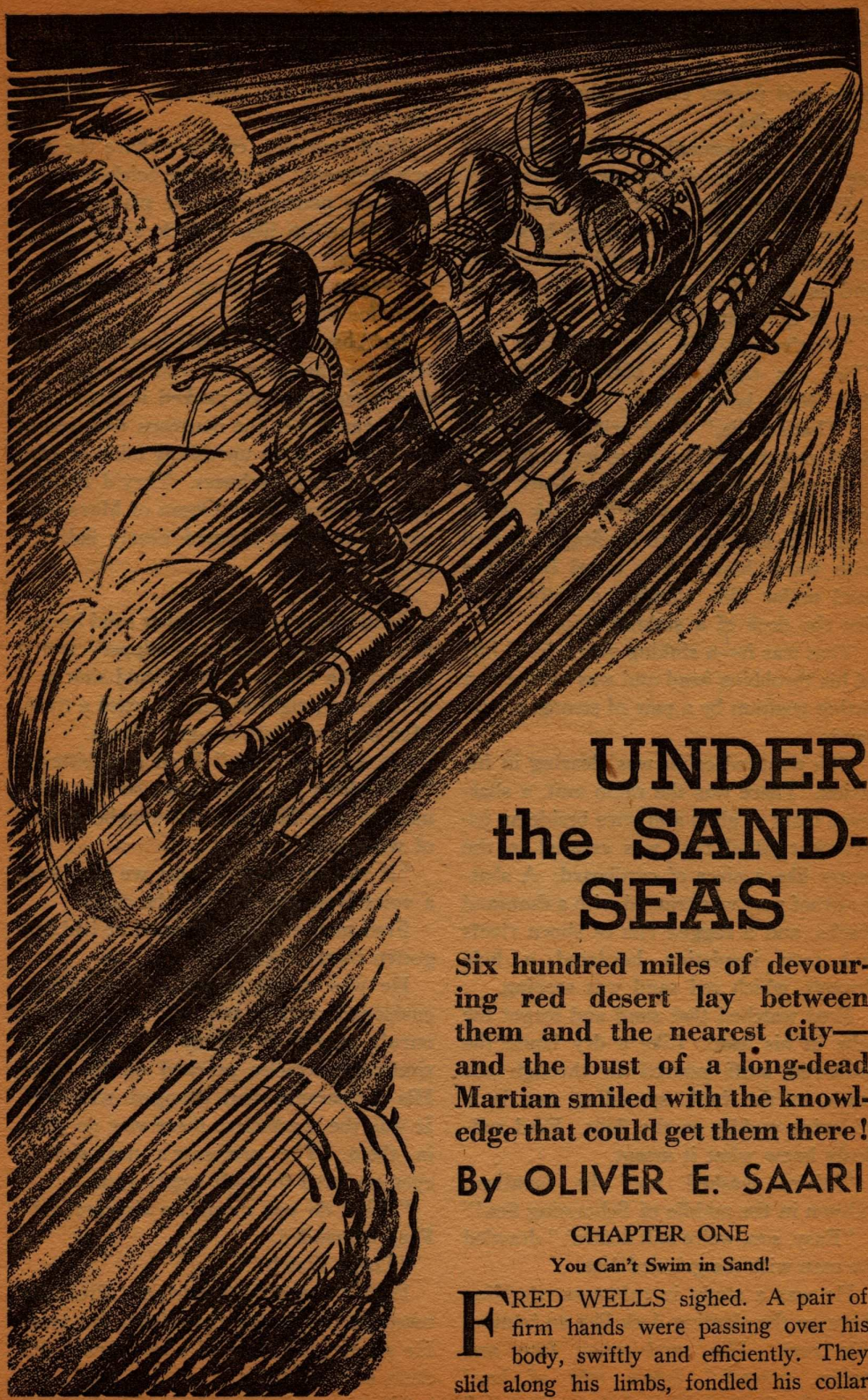
"Gherra," his voice sounded tersely, "tell me quickly."

The weary pilot lifted his head. "It's no use, Larov. The inhabitants of Number 3—"

"Then Number 3 *is* inhabited!"

"Yes, Larov, but they are a very young race. They are uncivilized and homeless, thriving on animals in a world of desolation. They are tiny black men who know nothing but evil. They killed my brother and were going to kill me when I escaped. They're mad, Larov—they will not be ready to meet the civilization of Mars for centuries to come, and that will be too late. If we attempt once more to land on Number 3 and greet its people the obvious result will be war. It's no use, Larov—why, one look at them and you'd think they were devils—"

THE END



UNDER the SAND-SEAS

Six hundred miles of devouring red desert lay between them and the nearest city—and the bust of a long-dead Martian smiled with the knowledge that could get them there!

By OLIVER E. SAARI

CHAPTER ONE

You Can't Swim in Sand!

FRED WELLS sighed. A pair of firm hands were passing over his body, swiftly and efficiently. They slid along his limbs, fondled his collar

bone, and passed on into the regions of his lower ribs.

"That's far enough," he muttered, trying to get up on elbow, opening his eyes.

He saw a face—a face that was made of furrowed leather and white bristle—a face that was as dry as the desert itself, and as old. The eyes squinted down at him in quiet approval.

"You've got luck, son," said the face. "You can thank old Mars' gravity for that. Not a bone broken."

"That's a lie," Fred grinned. "If my skull isn't cracked yet it's going to burst!"

Gingerly he smoothed his black hair over the sizable lump in the back of his head. The hair stuck to his fingers, pasted with warm blood. The metal floor was hard under him, slanting sharply down like the deck of a sinking ship.

That was it—a sinking ship! Fred lifted his throbbing head and was helped to a sitting position by a pair of strong, coarse hands.

The wrecked cabin was clearing in his vision. There was the radio unit, a shattered mass of glass and wire beside an instrument panel that was creased in the center like a piece of cardboard. A shatter-proof port was reamed with a thousand cracks, and a ragged rim of shorn rivets and torn insulation bordered a hole through which red sand was seeping.

Fred watched that sand and forgot the ache in his head. Like a dry liquid the brick-red stuff poured in through the crack in the hull, spreading out in a widening puddle on the floor. Fred suddenly knew what it meant.

"We're washed up," he breathed. "Down in the middle of Schonning Sea!"

"Easy, son, we're still floatin'," drawled the man with the grizzled face.

He was a study in calmness, standing there on the slanting deck like an immovable rock. His sand-beaten face and stocky, powerful figure told of hard strength. Back at Marsol they called Jeff half Martian and half devil. A Martian desert rat.

Fred, however, couldn't share the other's calmness. He eyed the brick-red sand that was pouring into the plane's cabin. It bubbled up like a thick syrup but it was—dry.

"We're still floating," Fred repeated, "but for how long?"

He'd been at the plane's controls, should have kept her nose up. All he knew was that something had yanked it down. He could remember the nauseous whirling of the plane . . . the uprushing table of sand . . . and then darkness. They'd cracked up in the great Sand Ocean of Mars—the vast desert that covered nearly half the planet's surface.

Sand.

Sand that was like no other sand known to man. It was light and slippery and it flowed like water. A man could sink in it of his own weight and never leave a trace. Men had sunk into it—and planes.

"It was my fault," Fred said bitterly. "I shouldn't have flown her so low. Not used to this Martian air—maybe a gust of wind blew us—"

"It was no current of air we hit," said a voice from the back of the cabin.

Fred turned. For a moment he had forgotten there was a third.

He was sitting in one of the leather-cushioned seats, a tall thin man with an unruly mop of dirty gray hair; with gold rimmed spectacles perched on his nose. His appearance had changed somehow. It was the spectacles: there was no glass in them. The professor's near-sighted eyes squinted through empty rims.

"What do you mean, no air current?" Fred demanded.

"This. Watch."

With a dramatic flourish the Professor removed the empty rims from his nose. He swung them toward a steel brace, left them sticking there.

"Not magic—magnetism!" he an-

nounced. "We are perched on top of a powerful magnet. Probably a vast deposit of lodestone—magnetic oxide of iron—somewhere under the sand."

"You mean to say we were yanked out of the sky by a—a magnet? A natural magnet?" Fred marveled. "That's why the controls—"

HE PAUSED when he sensed something climbing on his foot, lapping softly at his shoe. The sand! It was spreading on the floor, creeping up. The plane was going down, nose down—like a plane in the middle of the Atlantic would have gone. But here the end was slower and surer. You couldn't swim in sand! Fifty million miles from Earth, six hundred miles from Marsol—and they'd go clear to the bottom, if there was a bottom.

Fred looked for Jeff. He'd lived his life on the rim of this desert; he'd know what to do. Through the whirling dust particles his foot had set up Fred could see Jeff's powerful form, suddenly moving.

"Give a hand," came Jeff's voice. "We gotta break out the sled before the door's covered up."

The sled! It was in the back of the plane, an electric-powered toboggan that could travel on the sand like a surf-board, staying afloat by momentum alone.

Madly Fred clambered up the sloping floor, pulled hastily at knots which held the sled while Jeff slashed at leather thongs with a knife. Finally the sled was free of its trappings, sliding down the slope of the floor, raising a cloud of dust at the nose of the ship. The sand there was two feet deep now. The big sled, with its sand-wheel propeller, electric motor, and batteries was a bulky thing, heavy even in Mars-gravity. Fred pulled at it, wedging his foot against a brace, while Jeff fought against internal air pressure to jerk open the door.

"Wait," said the Professor, putting out a restraining hand.

Fred wheeled on him.

"You fool!" he yelled. "Can't you see we're sinking in this damned sand? Come on—help!"

"We are not sinking. Look."

Fred gouged some of the stinging dust from his eyes and looked. The Professor was pointing toward the nose of the ship. The red sand rippled gently over the pilot's seat, lapped at the instrument board. Three feet deep. But was it rising? It half-covered a fuel dial, but did not climb over it.

Jeff, too, was staring at the sand, his body bent in frozen action. He was puzzled, looking to the Professor for verification of his senses. The sand ocean was bottomless; yet the plane sank no further. Why?

"We've hit bottom," said the Professor logically. "Bottom, four feet down."

Fred sank limply in one of the chairs. A crack in the skull, death, and a miracle all in a row were too much. He had to take a breath.

But breathing was hard. Even after the dust had settled with strange swiftness, Fred found his lungs laboring, sucking at a vanishing atmosphere. A numbing chill had entered the cabin. It was the open door, of course: their precious oxygen was going out into the semi-vacuum of the Martian desert. It had been seeping out all along through the crack in the hull, but not as fast.

Out there was only an endless expanse of dry quicksand, a tiny, heatless sun, and a cold blue-black sky. Air at atmosphere pressure—and just as cold.

CHAPTER TWO

The 'Weeds

"WHAT do you suppose we've hit?" asked Jeff of the Professor, slamming the door in the face of the Martian landscape.

"The magnetic mountain, probably. The ship seems to be propped up on her nose and landing gear on something pretty solid under the sand."

"Probably just the thing you were looking for," grunted Jeff. "Maybe it reached up and slapped us in the face."

Fred saw the Professor stiffen up, the mild eyes suddenly snapping under the broken spectacles, an eager, thoughtful, hungry look transforming his slipshod features.

What kind of a nut, Fred wondered, would sit idly by in the face of death, and then leap up at the prospect of—of—what was it he hoped to find, anyway? Fred hadn't cared much when they'd started out from Marsol.

He'd come along hoping to find new adventure, but he hadn't thought it would be like this.

Fred was recently of Earth. He'd come to Mars because he was bored with money, bored with security, bored with dollars and uncles and sea-going yachts. Mars was still a frontier. Marsol, the larger of two Earth's outposts, was an odd little city of domes and strange men. Miners, digging for the strangely abundant pitchblende in the cliffs, scientists, mapping, cataloguing, prying . . . and a few close-mouthed ones like Jeff who just liked the bleak cliffs and the desert and lived there for the hell of it. Fred couldn't figure them out.

"No—no," the Professor was saying, pulling at his chin. "Why shouldn't there be a *natural* lodestone deposit under the sand? We've seen nothing to indicate anything else."

The old boy was getting cautious now, Fred thought, but he couldn't hide the gleam in his eye. They called him the "Professor" back in Marsol, though no one seemed to know if he'd ever rightfully held such a title. He was just a near-sighted old man who knew more about ancient Martian civilizations than he knew about Earth. He'd been the first and only Earthman to understand those time-worn symbols carved in the rock of the basalt mountains—those ancient Martian writings that were the only sign of a lost civilization. There were no ruined cities, no tombs—only those mysterious symbols carved deep in many an ancient rocky wall.

The Professor had read something in them that he wouldn't tell anyone. Not even the Institute or Foundation back on Earth that was still waiting patiently for a report from him. For years he'd been trying to get a rocket plane, to get someone to take him far out over the sand ocean.

And then Fred Wells had come from Earth and listened. His imagination fired by the old man's enthusiasm, he'd bought the plane. Money was nothing. But now that they were out here, mired in an incredible sea of dry quicksand, Fred was beginning to wonder what it was all about.

"You're right, Jeff," the professor suddenly said, breaking Fred's train of thought. "There is something funny going on out there. Ever see that many 'weeds all in one place?"

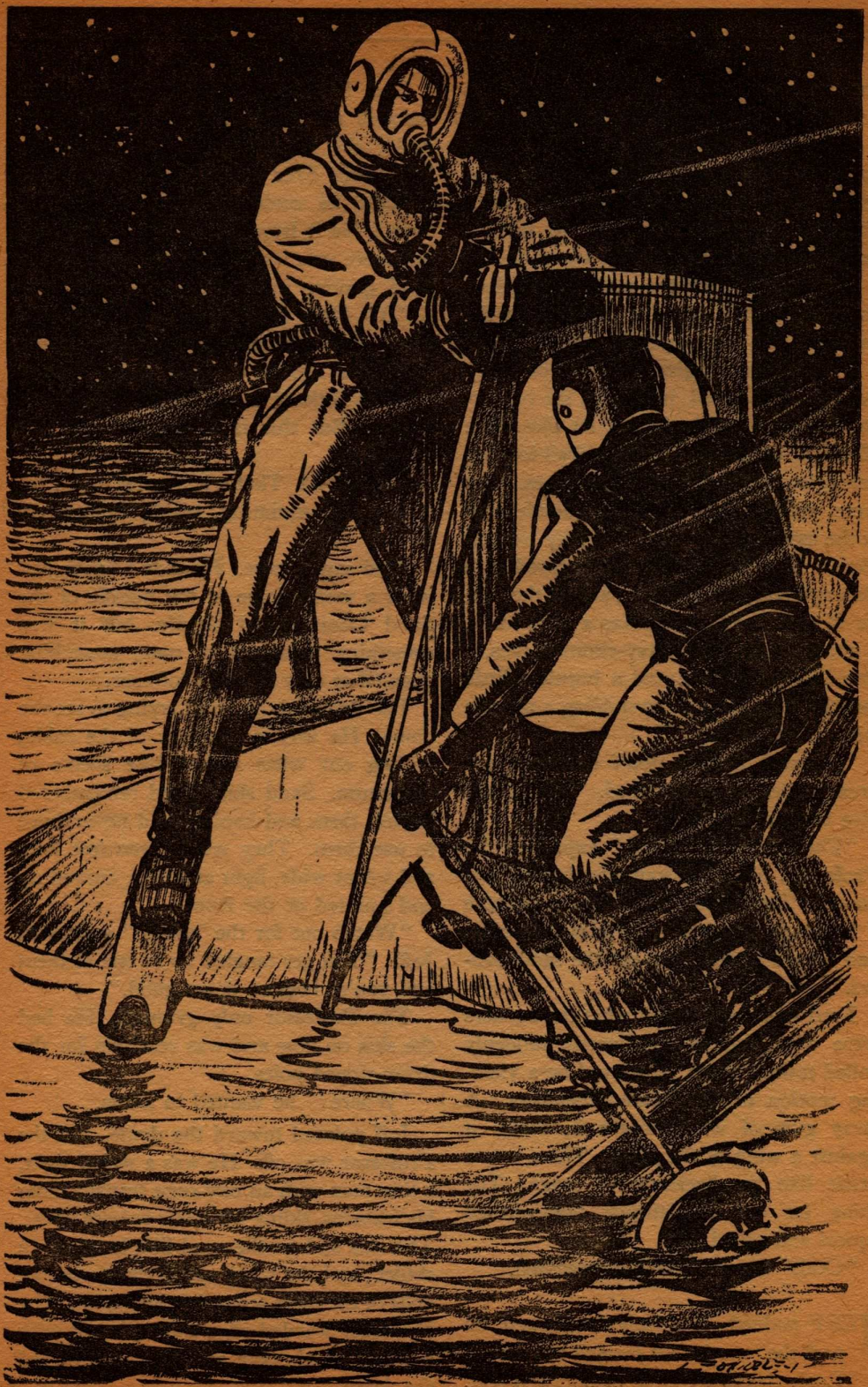
Jeff whistled. Fred looked out through the cracked port and saw—movement out on the sand. The cracked glass distorted vision but he could make out large shadowy shapes, stirring aimlessly like wind-blown things.

"What in—" Fred started to ask.

"'Weeds," explained Jeff. "Most prominent form of Martian fauna. If you're lucky, you see about one every year. They just let the wind blow them all over the desert—can't stop moving."

"We must be lucky then," Fred said drily. "If there's one out there there's a hundred."

"That's quite a crowd," agreed the Professor. "Mars hasn't been very prolific as far as life's concerned. The 'weeds and the sandburners and a few lichens up in



the rocks are about all you'd find. But come on, let's take a look outside!"

Jeff was breaking out the Mars-suits, garments of heat-retaining insulux that left not a portion of the body uncovered. Pressure tank and oxy-cone to furnish breathable air completed the ensemble.

Air soughed past the rubber-lined door as Jeff pulled it open. Outside were the sand and the sky—and the 'weeds.

Fred could imagine how an ordinary prairie tumbleweed, magnified six or seven diameters, might look a lot like these Martian creatures. Great, frail-looking entanglements of stick-like bones they were, rolling lightly on the smooth sand at the mercy of the wind. But they weren't plants. The thin bones were covered with skin and soft antler-down; and at the center of each ten-foot ball was a solid mass, a nucleus with two heavy-rimmed eyes, a thin beak of a nose, and a hopeless little mouth—all somehow resembling a tadpole with a human face.

"Damned if they don't look like my great-uncle," Fred breathed. "Those eyes give me the creeps."

"Those are the 'weeds," explained the Professor, his voice sounding hollow and far-off. "Semi-intelligent—they even have a language of sorts. Harmless, though; and what's better, they eat the sandburners."

Fred was about to ask what the burners were when one of the 'weeds suddenly rolled toward them. It moved by a yielding motion of the jointed members. A stray gust of wind caught it, threw it against a wing of the plane. There was a rattle like the breaking of twigs. The thing let out a plaintive high-pitched squeal and rolled on.

"Odd," the Professor commented.

JEFF nodded. Suddenly he pointed, on past the 'weeds, out toward the desert.

"Look there, a couple of hundred feet. See anything?"

The Professor blinked and squinted through the empty rims he still had on under the insulux visor, but shook his head. But Fred followed Jeff's gaze and thought he could see something. The 'weeds hid it from view most of the time, but there was something out there in the sand, glinting in the rays of the tiny sun.

"It's Mars metal," muttered Jeff, his sharp desert-trained eyes distinguishing what the others couldn't see. "We've found a little of it out in the hills—just scraps. But this is a low dome of the stuff."

"That's it! That's it!" cried the Professor, still squinting, trying desperately to see.

Fred saw it now. He didn't know just what a metal dome in the middle of the Sand Ocean could signify, but it was something unknown to man, something guessed at only by the Professor.

The Professor had quit trying to see the dome. He was in the back of the cabin, pulling out what looked like sheets of aluminum. Sand skis. Fred remembered buying them and hoping he'd never have to use them. They were seven feet long and a foot wide, light and thin, curved up and pointed at the front.

"Watch out for the 'weeds," suggested Jeff. "You get tangled up in one of them and you're bogged down good."

The Professor only grunted. He had the skis on now and was reaching for the drum-tipped poles.

"Where?" he wanted to know.

Jeff pointed toward the dome, and the Professor was off. He was a weird sight, a thin man with an oxy-cone transforming his features, skiing furiously to keep afloat. The skis slid on the sand like butter on a skillet; and the wide, round drums on the ends of the poles seemed to help a lot. The Professor warded off a rolling 'weed with a swing of his pole and went on toward the dome.

(Continued on page 114)



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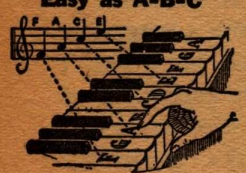
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UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

(Continued from page 112)

"Why couldn't he use the sled?" asked Fred of Jeff.

"We're six hundred miles from Marsol," Jeff pointed out. "The batteries in the sled are good for three hundred. Wouldn't want to waste them, would you?"

"Then how in—how're we going to get back to the base?" Fred wondered.

Jeff moved his hands like a man skiing.

Fred understood. But there was one thing he'd have liked to ask: could a man ski three hundred miles without stopping?

OUT on the sand the Professor had pushed a hole in the circle of 'weeds and had reached the metal dome. He'd thrown off the skis and was pawing excitedly at the metal. Suddenly he rose, hopped to a different place, and scratched away again.

"He'd better be careful or he's likely to fall off," Fred commented.

"Maybe we ought to go look after him," agreed Jeff.

To strap on the skis was the work of a moment. All too soon it seemed to Fred they were outside, gliding across the sand.

The sheer vastness of this Martian desert hit Fred like a blow. The horizon alone was near, a smooth unbroken rim of sand; and it left the world a tiny island in boundless space. In the blue-black dome of sky the sharp flecks of starlight shone, though sunset was an hour off. The air was thin and cold.

Ahead of him Jeff was steering expertly toward the dome, dodging carefully through the stirring circle of 'weeds.

"Hey, wait for me!" cried Fred, and the words bounced off his oxy-cone. Jeff didn't hear them.

Damn vacuum, Fred muttered to himself and concentrated on his skiing. It was well that he did, for just then a 'weed bounced lightly off the sand and fell on him. It seemed to have little weight, but it threw him off balance. He swung at it with one of his poles and saw his mistake when a ski dipped under sand. No two ways about it—he had to keep moving!

Fred planted his pole in the sand and wrenched at the ski. It came loose, reluctantly. Head low, he lunged ahead into the tangle of 'weeds. The brittle popping of stick-like bones and the high-pitched wailing of the creatures dinned in his ears. They were incredibly flimsy; yet they had an odd resilience, a tangling resistance that slowed him down. The skis felt dangerously sticky.

Yet he reached the dome, stumbled on it. Jeff dragged him to safety.

"Thanks," gasped Fred. "I thought for a minute I wasn't going to make it."

Jeff wore a puzzled frown.

"I don't know what's got into the things," he said. "They used to duck behind the horizon if you so much as looked at them, but now—"

"Maybe it's the dome," Fred suggested. "Maybe we're trespassing on something they consider—sacred!"

Jeff had no answer to that one.

CHAPTER THREE

"Open Sesame!"

THE dome was about four feet above sand at its highest point and about fifteen feet in diameter. It was made of metal of a copper color with a suggestion of yellow flecks in its grain, but it wasn't copper—at least not pure copper. Fred found that out when he tried to scratch it with one of his ski-buckles. It wouldn't scratch, not even faintly.

Fred turned to the Professor, who was squatting on all fours at the very top of the dome.

"What," he asked, "is this thing supposed to be?"

(Continued on page 116)



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UNDER THE SAND-SEAS

(Continued from page 114)

"Eh?" The Professor looked up, blinking.

"I want to know what it's all about," Fred began. "I think I deserve—"

"Oh, yes indeed," said the Professor.

He pointed to the metal surface immediately before him. Fred looked, and saw a tiny black thread of a crack outlining a circle about five feet in diameter.

"I've found the door," the Professor explained. "If you've got the key, I'd be glad to open it up and show you—if there was a keyhole."

Fred knelt down, as did Jeff, to follow the Professor's pointing finger. The thin crack went all the way around in a perfect circle, and it did seem to outline some kind of a door-plug in the metal. But there was no projecting handle, no keyhole, nothing which might be used to open it. And the metal itself was old. It had been buffed and polished by a sand-laden wind for aeons.

Fred remembered his Arabian Nights mythology.

"Open Sesame," he quoted. "Open—"

He swallowed the words. Suddenly he wished he could have plucked them back out of the thin air.

For that door to the ancient Martian crypt was moving. The crack was widening, becoming definite. With a faint grinding noise the tapered metal plug rose slowly from its socket, rose and left a dark opening leading into the interior. It came up on a column of metal like a hydraulic lift, stopped when it had risen about four feet.

"Shades of Ali Baba!" gasped Fred. "I only hope we don't run into the forty thieves."

"Nothing alive here," the Professor told him.

The words came from within the dome as the Professor poked his head into the opening.

"Then who opened it for us?" Fred wanted to know. "Don't tell me the magic words had anything to do with it!"

"Not the words, but maybe the thought! I suspect the thing was set to open on mental command. The writings say that when a mind strong enough shall come, 'the gate shall be opened'."

"You mean a sort of—thought-electric cell?" Fred marveled. "A mechanism set off by thought waves? But who—"

It was no use to continue; the Professor's lean form had disappeared down the hole.

FRED kneeled down and peered into the hole. In the faint light of the compartment he could make out the Professor, groping eagerly about the walls of a little room about fifteen feet square and ten feet deep. In the center of the room was a squat, cylindrical machine from which the piston that held the door-plug projected.

The Professor was kneeling down before a low dais, on which rested a black object. Fred heard him grunt in surprise. Then the Professor stood up quickly, lifting the dark object above his head. Fred reached down and grasped it.

The thing was heavy, black, and irregular in shape. Fred nearly dropped it when he brought it out into the light.

It was a statue, or rather a bust, for it was cast in the likeness of a man's head and shoulders. The hard black face was finely molded but somehow alien. It was not of Earth. The brow was wide, the eyes far apart. The nose was Roman and the mouth was large, thin-lipped, and closed. The bust stood about a foot and a half high and was made of shiny black stuff that was more metallic than bakelite. It weighed about thirty pounds in Mars gravity—that would make it about ninety pounds on Earth.

From the shoulders of the bust projected two bright knobs, their luster un-

tarnished by the ages. They seemed put there for a purpose, but Fred couldn't begin to guess what it was.

The Professor was writing a short novel in his notebook, reading the ancient Martian scripture like a book of A-B-C.

"Atomic power," he muttered. "I knew the Old Race had it, but they seem to have . . . " His voice died out.

"Seem to have what?" Fred prodded, but received no answer. He decided to try and emulate Jeff's tactic of quietly waiting.

But Jeff wasn't even interested. He was watching the 'weeds, peering off past them toward the horizon.

The 'weeds surrounded the dome in an impenetrable tangle now, but they never came nearer than thirty feet on any side. Their thin, piping squeals could be heard faintly through the cold air.

"They respect this dome all right," Fred said. "As long as we—"

"We've got to get the sled out of the plane," Jeff broke in. He nodded toward the west, where the sun was setting. "There's a sandblast coming up or I don't know the signs."

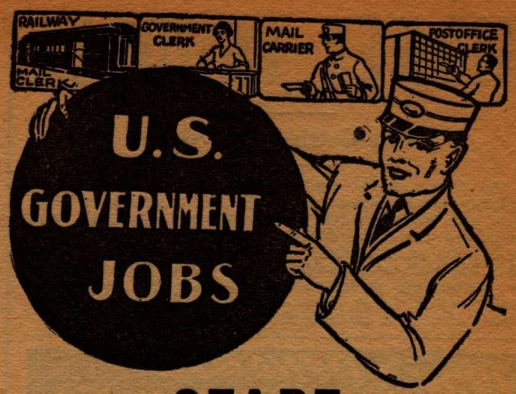
"Sandblast?"

"Storm. Got to get the sled and get out of here before it breaks. When the sand starts flying, you'll never see that plane again—or anything else if we're stuck on top of this dome."

Fred strained with his eyes, and thought he could make out a faint mistiness on the horizon. Night was coming there, racing across the sands. And with it, riding a mass of heavier, colder air, was the sandstorm.

"If we get the sled and get past those 'weeds," Jeff said, "we might be able to outrun the sandblast. It's been done. Sled's good for a hundred fifty per, and I don't think the wind can beat that."

Fred remembered those batteries. Six hundred miles to solid land—and the sled



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was good for three hundred. Jeff wasn't mentioning that.

"Hey! Sandblast coming," Fred yelled, shaking the Professor's shoulder.

The Professor waved him away with a menacing gesture and went on writing.

"The sooner we start the better, I suppose," Fred sighed. "We'll pick up the Professor on the way back."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sandblast!

THE 'WEEDS were stirring restlessly in their sixty-foot circle as Fred and Jeff launched themselves out on the treacherous sand.

"They can't do you much harm," Jeff said. "But don't let them trip you. We don't know just how far the bottom is here."

"I won't try to find out," Fred assured him.

Jeff was ahead, maneuvering skillfully on the wide aluminum skis, dodging one 'weed after another. A ten-foot wall of woven sticks, studded with gargoyle eyes in little furry bodies, they closed in. One of them knocked Fred off balance. Little three-fingered hands clutched at him. He fought them off, smashing his fist through the creature. The thing's squeal hurt him, but there wasn't time for argument or understanding.

More of the creatures were moving toward him now, rolling ahead on the little hands that clawed at the sand and pulled them on. His skis were strangely heavy, dragging. He planted his poles in the sand and pushed, but they slid back suddenly in a cloud of dust even as two more of the 'weeds hit him.

Fred never knew how it happened, but the horizon tilted crazily, the sand flew in his face, and he was down in the sand! The skis stuck straight down, immobiliz-

ing his feet. The 'weeds piped triumphantly, piling on him in layers.

"Damn!" cried Fred, swinging a last blow at the weird attackers.

His fist sank into the soft sand and stuck there. He tore it loose, only to find that his other hand had sunk deeper.

"Jeff!" screamed Fred. "Jeff, for God's sake get me out of this!"

But Jeff couldn't do anything. The 'weeds would trip him too, if they hadn't got him already.

Fred tore his hands loose again and wrenched himself to a sitting position. The skis were useless now. He groped for his foot under the sand, unstrapped the skis, let them slide into the depths.

He half-crawled, half-swam toward the plane, carrying bodily the 'weeds that still pressed him down. But when the sand came up to his waist his progress stopped. Out there, a hundred feet away, Jeff was standing in the doorway of the plane, yelling something. Good old Jeff—he'd made it! Nothing Jeff could do for him, though; the 'weeds were too thick.

When the sand reached his armpits, Fred reached up and took a death-grip on the framework of the nearest 'weed. Maybe the damn thing would hold him up—or he'd take it down with him! Or maybe the sand here was no deeper than it was by the plane. Fred concentrated on that thought, though he couldn't help thinking of how those seven-foot skis had gone lengthwise out of sight.

Then he felt the wind. He wasn't under sand after all. The red mist before his eyes was dust—dust backed by a fifty-mile gale. A force pulled on the 'weed he was holding, almost jerked it loose. The sand-blast was coming!

It was only a short, preliminary gust. When it died, the dust dropped swiftly in the thin air, leaving Fred's vision suddenly clear. *The 'weeds were gone.* Of the number that had been piled on top of



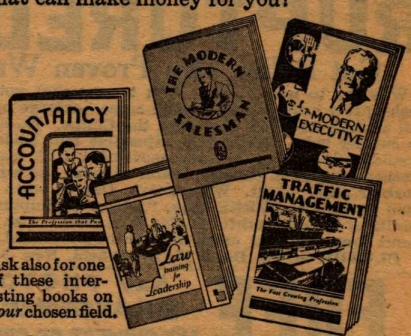
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him only one remained: the one he was holding. Its eyes stared owlishly at him, almost pleading.

Fred knew what had happened. These creatures were built for travel—and when the wind rose they couldn't help themselves!

Again the dust swirled up, swept by a giant broom from the west. The 'weed he was holding screamed as the wind tore at it. If he could hang on long enough—

There was a brittle pop and it vanished. Cursing, Fred threw the fragment of stick-like bone after it.

THE wind still blew, and Fred felt the pressure of the sand coming up past his oxy-cone. Then something loomed out of the dust before him—something dark and solid. It was Jeff, on skis! Jaw set, eyes squinting, Jeff was forging toward him, fighting every inch of the way. Fred ripped his arms loose from the sand again, waved them, shouted hoarsely into the wind. But he couldn't see any more—the sand was up over his visor.

From far away came Jeff's voice, ". . . rope . . . tie it. . ."

Fred felt it, looped around one of his arms. He groped for it blindly with both hands, tightened his fingers around it.

The rope suddenly tightened in Fred's grasp, almost pulled loose. The pull was steady but he didn't seem to move. God knew how far down he was!

Eventually the sand gave. Fred thanked his lucky asteroids for the light Mars gravity; on Earth Jeff could never have pulled him against the suction of the sand.

The wind was slacking again when he broke the surface. The plane was only a few yards off, tilted a little more but still above sand. In the doorway stood Jeff, his powerful legs braced, his body arched in effort. Foot by foot he pulled in the rope, dragging in Fred's Mars-suited body more easily now.

Jeff helped him climb into the plane. Fred sank in one of the leather-cushioned seats, shaking a little from his narrow escape. "Thanks," he said simply.

Outside the wind howled jeeringly.

"One more trip like that, son," drawled Jeff, breathing heavily, "and you're a good Martian for certain."

"If the wind hadn't blown those 'weeds away—"

"You wouldn't be much worse off," Jeff finished for him. "Don't forget the sandblast."

Fred hadn't forgotten. The howling of the wind and rocking of the plane were good reminders.

With much heaving and tugging they got the heavy sled propped up in the doorway, ready for launching. Jeff threw a bundle of narrow cylinders on a rack in the streamlined prow.

"Oxygen tanks," he said. "Better change yours now."

Fred did so without comment. The sled was about eight feet long, with four seat pads and six-inch rails along the sides for holding on. It had a bullet-nosed windshield at the front, and tapered back to the driving mechanism with its electric motor, batteries, and sandwheel in back.

"We're going to outrun the sandblast," Jeff said. "It'll be traveling west, toward the daylight side. We'll run west along with it and ahead of it."

"But Marsol is to the south," Fred pointed out.

"You can't run cross-wind to a sandblast. Besides, we'd never reach Marsol."

"Then where—"

"Mountain range, somewhere west. There is one, but how far, I don't know—come on!"

The plane gave a sickening lurch, teetered a second on a wing-tip, and then settled back.

They shoved the sled out on the sand,

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
6.00-16	3.15	1.45
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Fred taking a seat at the front. Jeff threw in the power and the sled accelerated smoothly, the wheel throwing a fan of sand in back. The motor had to be a quick and positive starter—that was one reason for using electric motors on the sleds.

With a grating noise they grounded on the dome, scarcely visible now in the darkness. The Professor was huddled behind the raised piston of the door-plug. He saw the sled and pushed toward it. leaning into the wind.

"Can't close the door!" he was yelling. "Filling with sand . . . all covered with sand. . ."

"Get in!" cried Jeff.

Somehow they got the sled launched again. The wind pushed with them now, adding to their momentum. The sled hissed ahead like a meteor streak.

They were safe—for two or three hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

Atomic Power

THE professor was talking, almost to himself. Fred looked back at him.

"I tell you we've found the secret of atomic power," the Professor was saying.

"What's that?" cried Fred, startled, when the meaning of the words penetrated into his consciousness.

The Professor leaned forward.

"Listen!" he said. "The ancient Martians had atomic power. I knew that long before we found the dome. The writings on the cliffs told of a place, a tomb, where the greatest treasure of Mars was buried. We found the tomb—the dome! And inside was the secret, the heritage left by the Old Race of Mars to any thinking being who wished to claim it."

"The statue and the writing on the metal tablets. You mean—"

"The writings explain a lot of things and outline the working principle of the

machine. The statue itself is a likeness of Tarum, the last great scientist of Mars. But inside it is a working model of an atomic power generator!"

"You mean to say that the old Martians set up the dome and even the writings on the cliffs, just to lead us to that?"

"Exactly," the Professor nodded. "Even the magnetic mountain that wrecked us is artificial—magnetized somehow to help us locate the dome on top of it."

"They overdid it," Fred said. "But why did they care? Why did they want us to find the dome?"

"They didn't care. All this was Tarum's own idea. You see, he himself had invented the atomic power machine and was justly very proud of it. He saw the end coming, and deemed it a pity that such a wonderful machine and its inventor should vanish simply because of—what happened. So he set up the dome and all the clues for finding it, so that even if visitors came a million years in the future, they'd still eventually run across it. It was purely personal pride, I suppose, that made him clothe his model in his own likeness.

"I've read only a part of Tarum's message," the Professor said, "but I think the machine involves some new way of speeding up neutrons—beyond anything they've been able to do with electrical fields back on Earth. The neutrons at high velocity collide with the nuclei of atoms, attach themselves, and beta rays —electrons—are given off.

"But Tarum's super-speeded neutrons step an element up into an isotope that throws off alpha particles as well—and fast. That means a complete disintegration of the element. Atomic power!"

"But you can't use those rays," Fred pointed out. "You'd have nothing but an artificial 'radium', only a lot more dangerous."

"Tarum's machine somehow changes them to electrical energy. This particular

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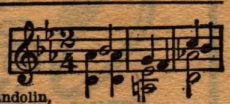
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model will burn only element 79—gold, I think. But it's built to dish out millions of k.w. hours from a milligram of fuel."

"Some power," breathed Fred. "But what happened to the old Martians? With power as cheap as that they should have—"

"They did," the Professor cut in drily. "They proved Tarum's invention to be the most powerful and the most destructive thing in the universe. They projected it like a searchlight—a weapon."

"Weapon!" Fred gasped. "Why, that would start their artificial radio-activity in everything—in the air, the soil—"

"Mars went up in a blaze of glory. When it was over, the civilization of Mars was buried under the red sand, which itself is a product of the disintegration. You notice nothing like it occurs on Earth. It's light—lighter than water—that's why you sink in it. Some strange allotropic arrangement, no doubt."

THE GENTLE vibration of the sled as it tore along the now smooth sand was the only sound after that. The Professor didn't say anything. How long, Fred wondered vaguely, before the batteries would be exhausted?

Suddenly Fred was struck by an idea. Electricity! He swiveled his body to face the Professor.

"You say this—this model atomic machine will dish out electric current?"

"Of course. Tarum—"

"Damn Tarum," Fred yelled. "Have you got any gold?"

"Gold? You're thinking of using Tarum's machine to power the sled? It might work if we had gold. I haven't."

Recklessly Fred zipped open part of his Mars-suit and ran his hand through his pockets. Razor sharp, the wind was, but Fred covered up before any damage was done. He had the contents of his pockets in his hands . . . a silver cigarette case;

an aluminum disc—return ticket to Earth! A few odds and ends, but no gold. Fred cursed the luck and tossed them all out in the wind. Why weren't gold trinkets in style? Even a bit of gold plate would have—

Suddenly he twisted around, pulled the Professor closer, and whooped.

"What's the idea saying you didn't have any gold?" Fred asked him.

"I haven't," snapped the Professor indignantly.

"Take off those broken specs," Fred laughed, though it was too important to be funny just then. "They aren't doing you any good anyway. But unless I'm mistaken, *there's enough gold plate on them to take us to Earth and back!*"

THE BASALT cliffs loomed high against the stars and the lights of Marsol beckoned brightly only a mile away.

But Fred was still thinking where they'd all be if the Professor had thrown away his broken spectacles!

For Tarum's machine had really worked. From the thin film of gold plate on the Professor's glasses it had generated power untold, power enough to drive the sled ten



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times around Mars with plenty to spare. It had nearly burned out the motor before the Professor had found out how to tone down the output.

But Fred had another thought, a disturbing one. Jeff and the Professor had been too long on Mars to worry about it, but Fred wanted to go back to a green Earth. He had a disquieting vision of the slim towers of New York crumbling into dust, melting into a red sand ocean. . . .

The hard black features of Tarum stared straight ahead, as if the soul of the long-dead scientist were still within them, driving the sled toward the base of the cliffs. The bright metal poles at the shoulders flashed electric blue now and then as something jarred Jeff's hasty connections.

Tarum, who had wished to make himself immortal, had done well to clothe that machine in his image, Fred reflected. But somehow he couldn't help wishing that they had never found it.

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AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

MANY of our readers have written in to this magazine and to its companion, *Astonishing Stories,* suggesting that a fault of modern science fiction lies in the fact that its authors are being driven to write progressively shorter and shorter stories. The responsibility for this trend can be traced to the plea of the readers for a wider variety of stories. The old styles of writing are changing; new concepts are coming to the fore. The incredible leaps that science itself has made open brand-new fields to explore.

Consequently, because it is only natural to want to investigate *all* of these new fields, readers have most heartily backed the magazines which present a half-dozen or more stories in each issue, each story treating of a different facet of their common subject: the romance of the future development of science.

But most of us who are long-time fans will realize, upon reflection, that it is the long stories, the novels, that have most greatly endeared scientific fiction to us. A novel—to reduce the question to an equation—represents a very large investment of time and energy to its author. A bad novel—i.e., one which is rejected—represents a huge loss. Very naturally, an author will spend more time and trouble in putting the final, polishing touches on a novel than on a short story.

You readers have indicated that there is a place for a magazine specializing in well-written, well-developed, *long* stories. Accordingly, this is the last issue of *Super Science Stories.*

Its place will be taken in the future by *Super Science Novels Magazine.* It will present, each issue, either a—literally, not figuratively—book-length novel, plus one shorter novel, or *three* shorter novels. It will also include one or two short stories.

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Our first book-length novel, appearing in the March issue, will be "Genus Homo," by L. Sprague de Camp and P. Schuyler Miller.

It will appear January 20th.

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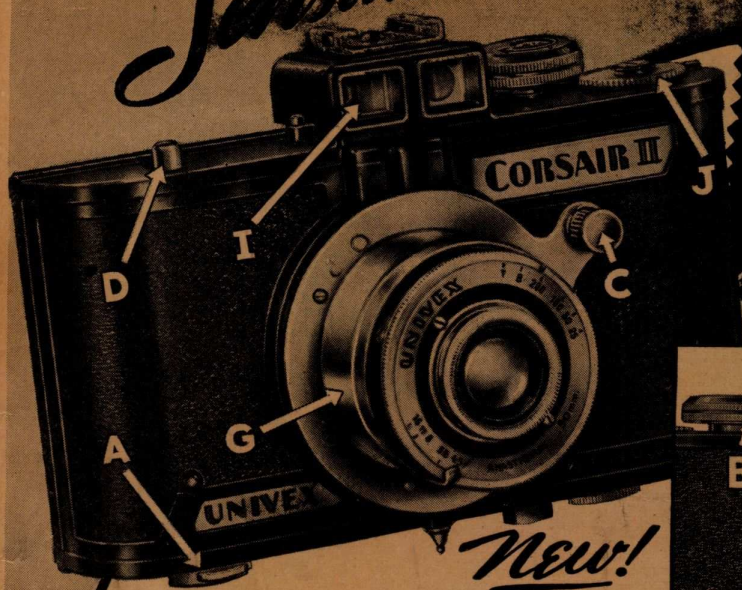
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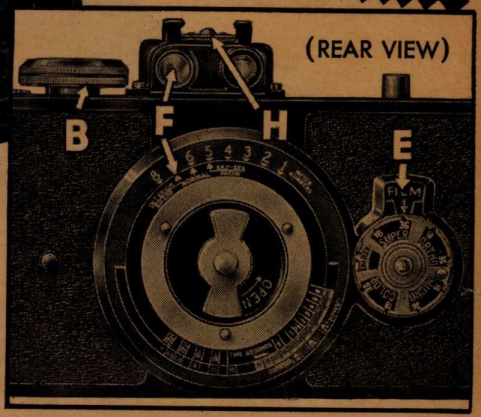
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